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1 . . . pool of vice . . .

I got out of my car and looked at the John Flower mansion, a quarter of a million dollars' worth of Connecticut real estate. The quarter of a million was only part of a colossal sum that had come from the pockets of suckers who subsidized the expensive tastes of John Flower. If you've heard of Al Capone, then the chances are good that the name John Flower isn't new to you.

Flower had a rambling, two-storey mansion set back well off the road. On a night when the wind was in the right direction you could hear the rumble of the Atlantic Ocean as it smashed itself against Connecticut rocks and beach. The wind was in the right quarter the night I drove there from New York City, but the sound of the surf was lost in the competition of hi-fi music and laughter. The lighted windows, parked cars and assorted noises from within the big house told me that this was party night, and that made me wonder even more why I'd been invited. On the phone John Flower had told me that he wanted to see me on a very important business matter and he'd asked me, in a very nice way, if I'd mind driving up to his place. This fascinated me because John Flower wasn't in the habit of asking for anything. When he wanted something it was invariably a direct order. If the order wasn't carried out, then it was Flower's usual custom to send a shock party consisting of anything from one to maybe a dozen men, depending on the size of the operation.

I walked towards the entrance steps, my size nines crunching on New England pebbles. Suddenly, there was more crunching added, and a guy built to the dimensions of a barn door was standing in front of me. It was a moonlit night and I could even see the small razor scars on his face.

"Hello, Borell," I said. "Your boss wants to see me."

"I know," Borell said.

He had a cute way of talking. He curled one side of his upper lip and squeezed the words out.

I said, "Since I'm on the guest list, maybe you won't mind getting your two hundred and fifty pounds out of the way."

"I want your hardware," Borell said thinly. "We have a rule. Nobody goes to see Mr. Flower when he's loaded."

"John Flower asked me to come here and see him," I said. "There was no mention of handing my gun over."

"It's a rule," Borell said, impatience making his voice crackle at the edges. "Mr. Flower pays me to see that rules don't get broken."

"But Flower isn't paying me," I pointed out. "I'm a free agent."

"You don't go into his house with a gun," Borell said.

I shrugged. "If that's the way it is, then that's the way it is. Rules are rules."

"I'm glad you see it like that," Borell said.

"I'm a reasonable kind of a guy," I said.

Borell's mouth moved a fraction of an inch. For Borell, this was a big, friendly smile.

"That's fine, Kent. Mr. Flower likes reasonable people. We all do."

"That's just dandy," I said. "Later on, when Flower asks you if I've shown up yet, you can tell him that I understand just how he feels about guns. You tell him that as far as I'm concerned, there are no hard feelings whatsoever."

"What do you mean by that?" Borell asked, his stupid face even stupider than usual.

"I mean it's okay with me," I said. "If Flower doesn't want anybody entering his house with a cannon, all right. It's his house. I understand. We all have our little rules, Borell. One of mine is: never hand over your gun to a guy who might use it to punch holes in you. So, tell Flower that if he still wants to see me, he can call at my office tomorrow."

"He said he wanted to see you tonight," Borell hissed.

"I know," I said. "And I was curious to know what was on his mind, but under the circumstances . . ."

Another belch-like sound emanated from Borell, who

was struck speechless for the moment. His feelings were clearly written in his face, however. He eyed me as a starving man would a big, -fat, juicy gum drop.

"Tell him how sorry I am that we weren't able to get together," I said. "Take good care of yourself, Borell. Better put on a coat or something. It gets chilly late at night this time of the year. Give my regards to Flower."

I turned away and started walking to my car. There was only the crunch-crunch of my brogues on the pebbles. Then, suddenly, there was an animal-like grunt from Borell and the scrape and scatter of pebbles as he moved fast from a standing start.

I counted three crunches, then I twisted to the side, but I left my right foot out. When I felt the contact of his leg hitting my leg, I hooked back. He grunted and went flying through the air, hitting the pebbles face first. I was on him quickly, judo-chopping twice, the force of the blows on the back of his thick neck sending his nose deeper into the pebbles. He jerked once and was still. I man-handled him onto his back and took an army-type .45 from his shoulder holster.

I pushed the .45 into my coat pocket and entered the house. The period couch in the ornate entrance hall had once possibly held the weight of Louis XIV. It now supported a curvy blonde half in an evening gown, and a grey-haired guy in a dinner suit. The guy I recognised as Judge Henry P. Hamlin, an eloquent speaker at civic banquets. At the moment he was drunkenly telling the blonde how little he was understood by his wife. The blonde was one step away from being completely blotto. Her eyes were closed and she kept murmuring: "I like your style, dearie . . ."

The last time I'd seen Judge Hamlin had been at a police department banquet in honour of a retiring captain. The judge had made a long speech about integrity, justice and honour. I walked past the distinguished champion of justice and found myself in another room where couples, two sets of them this time, were testing the furniture. One guy was from the team of lawyers that kept Flower out of

trouble, the other was a stranger to me. The dames were the same brand of lollipop as the blonde in the entrance hall.

The room beyond this one was the Party Room, loaded with fun-makers. The party girls outnumbered the male guests. The girls had many things in common—they were beautiful and shapely, they knew how to please men, and they were great actresses—they actually appeared as though they were enjoying themselves. About this last part, I knew better—more than one party girl had told me how much she detested the men at get-togethers of this sort.

The guest list was very interesting. I saw Frank Archer, from the DA's office. He spotted me through his whisky haze, gulped, grabbed a brunette and disappeared. A New York City alderman saw me just before I spotted him and I caught sight of his distinctive fat bottom as he hustled his way out of sight.

John Flower was in earnest conversation with a party of distinguished looking men who were strangers to me. They could have been state or national senators or congressmen—they could have been almost anything or anyone—but the fact of them being there meant they were up to no good, that they were taking somebody for a ride and fattening up their own bank accounts.

Flower saw me and smiled. He had the smile of a glad-hander, a big flash of white teeth that made those who didn't know better think Flower was one of the nicest, most sincere guys in the world. He said something to the small cluster of men and broke away from them. He put out his hand to me and I took Borell's gun from my pocket.

Flower froze, and so did the sprinkling of his goons, who were stationed at strategic points around the room. Hands went inside coats. I gave Borell's gun to Flower and hands came out of coats empty.

"This is George Borell's gun," Flower said to me.

"Yeah," I said. "I took it from him because I was afraid he might lose his head and put a slug in mine."

Flower hefted the gun and grinned. He was a handsome man with a thin, dark face and very bright eyes. His dinner suit was a perfect fit.

"Borell is very fond of his gun," Flower said. "Taking it from him took a lot of doing."

"He made it impossible for me to do otherwise," I said. "He insisted that I give him *my* gun."

"And you refused," Flower said, superfluously. I nodded.

The distinguished guests and even some of the girls were now looking in our direction, deeply interested in the proceedings. Their attention suddenly drifted to the room entrance, however, when Borell sounded out with a bellow of rage that made the fancy chandeliers rattle.

Borell stood there for a moment, feet planted wide apart, eyes wild. The New England pebbles had scratched deep furrows in his face and he looked like something out of a bad dream. His bellow coincided with his spotting me. He came at me now, his long arms swinging, while he made ugly noises deep down inside his bull chest. I planted my feet wide and made myself ready for his charge. but I knew damn well that if he hit into me with his two-hundred-and-fifty pounds. I was going to give a very bad imitation of an immovable object. It was Flower who preserved the healthy state of my ribs by stepping in front of me and holding out Borell's gun.

Borell stopped like he'd hit an invisible wall.

"Were you looking for this?" Flower asked in a pleasant voice, lifting the .45 a little higher.

Borell nodded and stood there, blinking his eyes stupidly. Flower tossed the gun to him and Borell caught it in both hands like a very jittery first baseman.

"You're supposed to be my bodyguard," Flower said. "I expect you to be a lot more careful about the one important tool of your trade. Mr. Kent found it and gave it to me to return to you. Now go back to your post."

Borell gulped, nodded, gave me a very brief but murderous glance, turned on his heel and left the room.

Addressing everyone in general, Flower said, "There's been a slight misunderstanding, ladies and gentlemen. I apologise for it and ask you to kindly overlook it."

Someone had turned off the hi-fi set. Now it came on full blast and the merrymakers went back to the business of getting pie-eyed. Flower handed me a big smile.

"I don't think I've ever seen George Borell that angry," he said "You took a big risk, Kent."

"I figured it would go like it did," I said. "You have some very important people here, Mr. Flower."

His eyes narrowed momentarily because I'd hit the word "Mister" a little harder than was necessary; my way of letting him know there were a lot of other titles I'd like to give him. But his smile flashed on again and he was his old, charming self.

"I invite all sorts of people to my little parties," he said. He paused. "Even private investigators."

"I had no idea I was being invited to a party," I said. "You mentioned something about important business."

"That's quite true," Flower said. "I'd like to have a talk with you on a very urgent matter."

"Which is?"

At that moment, one of Flower's goons came coughing his way into the picture. A big guy with a face like a mottled dumpling. I knew him as well as I knew at least half of Flower's hired punks. His name was Sam Duff. He gave me a curt nod and turned to face Flower.

"What is it?" Flower asked.

"Long distance call from Philly," Duff said.

Flower nodded. To me, he said, "I've been expecting this call all evening. I'll be on the phone for at least half-an-hour. In the meantime, make yourself comfortable. Have a drink. I'm sure you'll find some willing female company."

I sniffed like his idea smelled. "I'd rather get some air."

"Suit yourself," Flower said, nodding towards french windows. "Have a look at my garden."

"I'll do that," I said.

Flower had the garden loaded with marble statues. All of them were females and none of them wore any clothes. I lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the stars. That was when I heard the sound of a splash. I looked in the direction of the

sound and saw a high hedge. A flagstone path led through a slot in the hedge. I went along the path, walking with my weight on the back foot so I made a minimum of noise.

On the other side of the hedge was a swimming pool. In the bright moonlight, I saw a dame climb from the pool. She stood there for a moment, shaking her long wet hair. She had a figure that shamed Flower's marble statues. I watched with absorbed interest as she walked along the edge of the pool and climbed the ladder to the diving board. She poised at the end of the board and I felt like applauding. She bounced once, twice, on the board and then launched herself upward and outward. She jack-knifed perfectly and hit the water in a clean, sharp dive.

I moved closer, onto a grass apron, as she splashed around in the pool. I saw a heap of clothing on the grass. There was a handy bench, so I lowered my weight onto it. A tree threw a shadow over the bench. I dropped my cigarette onto the grass and ground it out.

She climbed from the pool. She hummed a soft little song under her breath as she walked to the grass apron. She bent low, picked up a towel and rubbed herself dry, making delicious little sounds. I sat back, contentedly watching. When she was fully dressed, I flicked my lighter to flame and held it to the end of a cigarette.

Next thing I knew, I was hit in the face with a wet towel. It hurt, too, and I damn near got my nose burned from the cigarette. After that she gave me a tongue-lashing. I let her call me some names. When she finished, I said: "I make no apologies. I liked what I saw and, given the same opportunity, I would sit right here on the bench and watch again."

She came a little closer. I flicked my lighter to flame so she could see my face, and at the same time I had a good look at hers. Her face was on a par with her figure, which made it damn near perfect.

"I . . . I thought you were someone else," she said, with the slightest hint of an apology in her voice.

"At the moment," I said, "I wouldn't care to be anybody else."

"You weren't inside with the others," she said.

"Were you?" I asked.

"I'd like a cigarette," she said.

I put two new cigarettes in my mouth, lit them, handed her one. We sat down on the bench.

"How long were you watching?" she asked.

"Since just before the last dive," I said. "I was standing in the garden when I heard you splashing around in the pool."

She puffed deeply on the cigarette. "Well, you're sober," she said at last. "That's something. After I threw the towel, I got ready to do some kicking."

"To protect your honour?" I asked.

"That's a nasty crack," she said.

"It was a question," I said.

She took another drag on the cigarette and got rid of the smoke with an angry sound.

"If it was a crack," she said, "I guess I asked for it. You don't come to affairs like this unless you expect something to happen."

"How'd you get invited?"

"A girl friend of mine arranged it for me. Oh, I'm not trying to suggest that I didn't have any idea of what went on. I knew it was a wild party date, but the fee is a hundred dollars and whatever else you can latch onto. When you're a hairdresser at sixty a week, a hundred dollars has a nice ring to it."

"Why aren't you still inside the house?"

"I'm not going back in," she said. "I don't want the hundred dollars as much as I thought I did." She flipped the cigarette away. It hissed as it landed in the pool. She said, "You don't have to believe anything of what I just told you."

"Why shouldn't I?" I said. "There's no percentage in you giving me a story. You don't even know who I am."

"Not yet," she said.

"Larry Kent," I said.

"I'm Diana Marsh."

She offered her hand and I took it, holding it a little longer than necessary before dropping it back onto her lap.

"You're not one of them," she said.

"I could be," I told her. "I could be a crooked cop, politician or legal official."

"You wouldn't be talking like this if you were," she said. "Besides, I know you're not."

"Don't go around the rest of your life making judgments on people a couple of minutes after meeting them," I said. "Especially guys who sit in the shadows and watch you while you swim without the hindrance of a bathing suit."

"That's what makes me sure you're not one of them," she said. "You watched me, yet just a few minutes after I found out, here I am talking to you like we're old friends."

I said. "I'll bet I've seen a lot more of you than most of your old friends."

"You're so right," she said.

I smiled at her. "I guess I should apologise for sitting here and watching you."

"Apology accepted."

I lit another cigarette for her and she dragged deeply. The spark lengthened. She blew out smoke.

"I don't blame them," she said. "The girls, I mean. It's all right to take what you can get, like they're doing, when the men are like the ones inside. It's just that I . . . well, I don't want to give the impression that I'm a prude."

"You don't have to explain," I said. "You came here, didn't like what you were getting into and so you dived into the pool to cool off. Right?"

"Right" she said.

"Then let's leave it at that."

She looked at the glowing tip of her cigarette. She said, "You don't have to tell me what you're doing here . . ."

"In other words, you'd like to know."

"That's right," she said unashamedly. "I don't consider myself a good judge of character—I've been wrong too often

—but I know you don't belong with the crowd inside. However, you don't look like the kind of a man who wastes his time, so I'm sure you're here for a good reason."

"John Flower said it was a good reason," I said.

"Then you came to see John Flower and not to attend the party?"

"Correct." I paused to light a cigarette from the end of my first. "I think Flower wants me to sell him something."

"You don't look like a salesman," she said.

"A really good salesman," I told her, "knows it's to his advantage not to look like a salesman."

"You wouldn't be giving away such an important trick of the trade if you were a salesman," she said.

"Now," I said, "you're beginning to impress me with your mind."

She smiled at the indirect praise of her figure, took another drag at the cigarette and flipped it away with a flick of a finger. A hiss told me that it had joined the first cigarette in the pool.

"So you're not a salesman," she said.

"I'm not a salesman."

"If you tell the truth," she said, "I'll get to what you are sooner or later by the process of elimination."

"I wouldn't dream of putting you to all that trouble, Diana. I'm a private detective."

"Well," she said. "Well."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, Mr. . . ."

"Larry," I cut in.

"So," she said after a pause, "Mr. John Flower has asked a private detective to call on him."

She leaned back and turned her face up to the sky. "I've heard a lot about John Flower. I suppose anyone who reads the newspapers and looks at TV has. He is many things and most of them are rotten. I can't see why he would want an honest private investigator to come and see him on business, particularly on the same night he's throwing a

party for some of the people who help make him immune from the law."

"That," I said, "is more or less what's been going through *my* mind."

"He may have a job for you," she said.

"The pay will have to be sky-high," I told her.

There was a pause before she said, "Is that what bridges the difference between being honest and not—the amount of money a job is worth?"

"I take only the jobs that let me go on living with myself," I said. "I've had people come to me who could barely afford my fees and I've turned them down only because I didn't like the smell of the job. I've also turned down small fortunes on dirty jobs."

"Do you think it's possible that Flower could offer you a job that doesn't smell?"

"It's in the realm of possibility," I said. "Stranger things have happened."

"And if he does offer you a . . . clean job?"

"Then he's going to pay right through both nostrils. The job is the thing, honey, not the guy I happen to be working for"

She was about to say something, but there was a sound behind us and she got to her feet. I got up, too.

Sam Duff, John Flower's number one goon, stood there.

"Mr. Flower wants to see you, Kent."

"Tell him I'll be there in a couple of minutes."

"Mr. Flower said I was to take you to his den. He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"That," I said, "was the wrong thing for you to say, Duff. Just for that I'm going to have another cigarette with the lady."

"No, please," Diana said quickly. "Go inside with him. I don't want to be the cause of any trouble."

"No trouble at all," I said. "As a matter of fact, it's a pleasure."

"I'd feel better if you went in," she said. "Honestly, I would."

She seemed pretty upset. She put both hands on my right arm and she squeezed. It was a squeeze of urgency and not endearment.

"All right," I said. "If you want to get rid of me . . ."

"I'll see you again," she said.

"When and where?"

"You just leave that to me."

"Mr. Flower," Duff said, "is waiting."

"I think I'll go for a walk through the grounds," Diana said, and she turned away and started walking.

"Didn't see *her* inside," Duff said, his brow furrowing. "What happened to her hair? It's all wet."

"She just washed it," I said. "She wants to look her best for all the nice gentlemen Flower invited to the party."

Duff looked at me like he wanted first option on my liver.

"Follow me," he grunted.

I did. Past the french windows and into the big room. Some of the guys and girls had disappeared.

From behind a partition I heard some very interesting dialogue as Duff and I walked past.

Man: "Here's a picture of my son."

Dame: "Nice kid."

Man: "I love you, baby!"

Duff and I walked up the staircase I'd seen John Flower climb. Duff led me to a leather-padded door. He pounded hard on the door.

"Yes?" came Flower's voice.

"I have Kent," Duff said.

"Let him in and leave us alone."

Duff opened the door and stepped back. I entered John Flower's den and Duff closed the door behind me. Flower was now in a three-quarter length silk smoking jacket. He had a long, thin panatella in his mouth. He took the cigar out to say: "Sorry to keep you waiting, Kent."

"Think nothing of it," I said. "I was admiring the sights outside the house."

"My Florentines," Flower said with pride. "I had those

marble statues made in Italy, Kent. Italian artists have a feel for statuary."

"Yeah," I said. "The Italians have been great artists, right from Da Vinci to the Mafia."

Flower showed me his teeth and then he laughed. "There's too much talk about the Mafia in this country. As soon as there are a few killings the police blame it on the Mafia."

I said, "You should be the last man in the world to complain about that."

"Complaining? Who's complaining? I was only making an observation."

Flower gave another display of his ivories and lit a cigarette and returned the silver lighter to his desk. He brought the cigarette to his mouth, puffed, blew out a dollar's worth of smoke.

"I appreciate your driving here all the way from the city," Flower said. "We may not have seen eye to eye in the past, Kent, but I'm sure you'll agree I'm the type of fellow who likes to show his appreciation."

"All right," I said. "You like to show your appreciation."

"Please sit down, Kent."

I sat down.

He walked over to me, stopped, reached into the right-side pocket of his smoking jacket and took out an envelope. He dropped the envelope in my lap.

"Look inside," he said.

I did. There were two one-thousand dollar bills, crisp and new.

"This is very nice," I said.

"Does it make your trip worth while?"

"It'll figure out at about fifteen dollars a mile," I said.

"A lot better than taxi rates," he smiled. "Or, for that matter, your usual rates as a private investigator."

"Only one thing worries me," I said.

"And what's that, Kent?"

"Well, Christmas and my birthday are both a long way off."

"You're wondering what I expect you to do for the two thousand, eh?"

"Something along those lines," I said.

"Stop worrying," Flower said. "I don't want you to do anything at all."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing."

I said. "Believe it or not, when I found out there was no Santa Claus, it came as a real shock. But since then, I've learned that when people come bearing gifts, it's always a good idea to go looking for the price tag. Sometimes it's a bit hard to find the price tag, but it's there if you look long enough."

I held out the envelope to Flower.

"I don't see any price tag," I said. "And I'm not in the mood to go looking."

"You don't have to look," Flower said. "I'll tell you all you need to know. I'm sure you remember my cousin, Nick."

"There is a guy," I said, "whom I'm not apt to forget in a long, long time."

"You helped send him up the river on that multiple assault charge," Flower said.

I shook the envelope at Flower. "I'm sure this two thousand isn't intended as a long overdue reward. I half expected something from you for my part in that, Flower, but my idea of your idea of a reward for that little episode was more in the nature of a working-over by some of your employees, like Duff and Borell, for instance."

"I'll admit I was angry when you refused my offer of five thousand dollars not to testify against my cousin," Flower said.

"Angry," I said, "is putting it very, very lightly. I was surprised when you didn't try to give me the business. Matter of fact, when you phoned me tonight . . ."

"You figured I had finally picked my time to get back at you for sending Nick up on the manslaughter charge, eh?"

"It entered my mind."

"Yet you came here, anyhow. That took nerve, Kent."

"Another compliment," I said. "This gets more and more surprising by the minute."

"Things have changed," Flower said. "When Nick was sent up, almost five years ago, I sometimes had to use tough methods to get what I wanted. But tough methods don't pay any more. There are better ways to get what you want."

I said, "I guess eventually you'll get around to telling me what this two thousand bucks is for."

"Nick," Flower said. "My cousin, Nick."

"He's in Sing Sing," I said. "And he's not due to get any sun on his face for about five more years."

"A slight correction," Flower smiled. "My cousin was released from Sing Sing prison this afternoon."

I got to my feet. "Released?"

"I pulled at some of my contacts," Flower explained briefly. "Anyhow, Nick and I had a long, heart-to-heart talk. My one worry about Nick, Kent, concerns you."

"Oh?"

"As can be expected, Nick still hasn't forgotten that you're the one who sent him to Sing Sing."

"Let's get one thing straight," I said. "Your cousin, Nick, he sent himself to prison. I'm just a guy who happened to give evidence at his trial. I told the judge and jury exactly what happened. In my opinion, Nick got off very lightly with ten years I figure it should have been the chair."

"No, Kent." Flower waved a manicured hand at the envelope. "I'm still hoping that you'll decide to be practical."

"What does that mean?"

"As I told you, I had a long talk with my cousin Nick the other day . . . mainly about you. Now, I feel that Nick can go a long way in my organization. He's more like a brother to me than a cousin. His mother brought us both up. When she died, Nick was still a kid. I took him under my wing."

I thought: big vulture and little vulture.

"I warned Nick about his temper," Flower went on. "It was his bad temper that got him into trouble."

"Trouble for him," I said, "but coffins for three other

guys. When Nick got drunk and aimed his car at those guys, It was no different than aiming a gun."

"You've more or less made that point," Flower said grimly, but then he was his old, white-toothed, smiling self again. "I don't want trouble, Kent. When there isn't trouble, this world of ours is a very nice place in which to live. That's what I tried to get across to Nick during my talk with him the other day. He said something about getting back at you for what you did to him. Do you know what I said to him?"

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I told him that if he tried anything foolish like that, then I'd be forced to keep him out of my organization. I said I had room for smart operators, but not for soreheads who couldn't use the good brains they were born with."

"And what did Nick have to say to that?"

"Well he thought things over, and finally he agreed to steer clear of you—if you would leave him alone. He has the idea that you might try to make more trouble for him."

"All right, what if Nick and I meet on the street. What is it you want me to do?"

"I don't want you to do anything, Kent. That's the beauty of it. To earn yourself that two thousand, you don't have to do one solitary thing."

"Except leave Nick alone."

Flower smiled. "You're smart, Kent. I've always said that, and a lot of other people have said it, too. Here's your chance to prove how really smart you are."

I said. "This two thousand you're offering, Flower . . ."

"It's not an offer, Kent. It's a gift."

"A gift, eh? Well, here's one gift that I insist on looking in the teeth of . . ."

I held the envelope towards him.

"Sit down again, Kent," he said. "Make yourself comfortable

"I'd never be comfortable if I kept this money," I said. "It'd put me in the same category as those creeps you invited here tonight. You'd be buying a piece of my soul, Flower."

"That's just plain ridiculous," Flower said.

"Is it?" I let the envelope fall onto his desk. "Just tell Nick to stay away from me. I won't go looking for him, but if he comes my way I'm not going to budge an inch."

"That could be a foolish attitude," Flower said.

I continued, "You'd like to put my soul on a platter and hand it to Nick as a welcome home present. You'd say, 'Here you are, Nick. I bought this for you. This guy won't ever give you any trouble again. He's ours. We've got him in our hip pockets!'"

"Okay," Flower said. "I tried to give you a break and you wouldn't take it. Now I'm going to tell you what it was Nick said the other day. He told me that one night didn't go by when he didn't dream of all the ways he was going to get back a you, Kent. But, okay, so you're still the captain of your own soul. Let's see what you're going to do with it."

I said, "There's only going to be one change in my way of life. I'm going to be a little more careful when I walk down a dark street. It's been a very interesting evening, Flower."

"I have one piece of advice," Flower said as I went to the door.

I held onto the door-handle and waited.

"Don't get in Nick's way," he said. "You're not on my team, but you can still save yourself a lot of grief."

I let myself out without answering. Sam Duff was standing against the wall, trying to look like one of the leaves of a rubber plant.

Downstairs, only the goons were in sight. The guests and the girls had evidently found secluded corners for themselves. The goons gave me fish-eye looks.

I pushed open the entrance door and started down the steps. Borell materialized from the shadows thrown by a flowering tree. The moon was still out and I could see the damage done to Borell's face by his skid along the pebbled drive. He stepped in front of me.

"Say something, Kent," he breathed.

"Sure," I smiled. "Goodnight, Borell."

"Say something nice and nasty," he pleaded. "Get me mad enough to bend your nose all over your face."

"Some other time," I said, and I walked around him.

I went to my car and saw that I had company. Diana Marsh was huddled up in my rug.

"Give me a lift to the city?" she asked.

"Don't you want to say goodbye to your host?" I said, getting into the car.

She made a wry face.

"Please, Larry, let's get away from here."

Just as I turned the ignition key, I heard the crunch-crunch of Borell's approaching footsteps. I fed the engine some gas and then he was leaning on the car. But he wasn't looking at me. His attention was rivetted on Diana.

"Shouldn't you be inside?" Borell said.

"No," Diana said. "I'm leaving with Mr. Kent."

"I want your name," Borell demanded. "No dame is going to take off and still collect her hundred bucks! What's your name?"

"Mildred McGurk," Diana said. "With three R's."

Borell burped. He leaned into the car and started to shake a dirty finger at Diana. That was when I put the car in gear. We went one way and Borell went another. I caught a glimpse of him in the rear vision mirror. He was sitting on the pebbles. Borell was going to have scratches on more than his face.

Diana laughed for a couple of minutes. Some dames laugh like they're eating canapes, but Diana had a corned-beef and cabbage laugh. It was contagious; I just had to join in. Finally our laughter subsided and we rode along for a while in silence. It was Diana who spoke first.

"I thought you'd never come out of there," she said.

"Flower and I had a lot of things to tell each other," I said

"Are you going to work with him?" she asked.

"Nope."

"You turned him down?"

"I guess you could say I did."

After a pause, she said, "I was hoping you wouldn't have anything to do with him."

I took my eyes from the road for a moment and looked at her. She smiled at me. Her hair had dried and even in the dim light from the dashboard, I could see that it was soft, thick hair

"Glints of red," I said, thinking aloud, as I returned my attention to the road.

"When the sun shines on it," she said. "You *were* referring to my hair, I assume?"

"I was," I said.

"I just love the sun on me," she said. "During the heat of the summer, I often drive up along the Hudson River till I'm miles from nowhere, then I get out of the car and walk through the woods till I find a lake or a stream."

"And go swimming?"

"Yes."

"Like you did in Flower's pool?"

"Yes."

I said. "You must keep the boy scouts and the bird watchers very happy. Do you go alone on these drives?"

"Always."

"If you ever want company . . ."

"I think I'm going to hold you to that," she said. "But please give me some advance notice."

"Why?"

"Well, I'll need time to buy a bathing suit."

"I'll phone you some Sunday morning."

"The stores," she said, "are closed on Sundays."

I just smiled at her. We rode along in silence again for a while I flicked on the radio and soft band music came on.

"If you like," she said, "you can tell me to mind my own business."

"If I think that's what you should do," I said, "I'll lose no time in telling you."

"You interest me," she said. "I know that a girl shouldn't tell a man he interests her when she hardly knows him—but I was never very good at doing things a smart girl should do."

I answered by slowing down the Plymouth and wheeling it off the road. I braked, twisted the ignition key and the radio went off with the engine. In the sudden silence we could hear the chirp of crickets and the occasional bass of a frog. To our left and beneath us was the moon-silvered surface of a trout stream.

"It's lovely," she said. "Clean and healthy."

She shivered. I knew she was thinking about John Flower's party.

I said, "Are you still glad you didn't earn that hundred dollars?"

She looked at me. It was plainly evident that she wasn't going to answer.

"Okay," I said. "You don't need that kind of money."

She smiled.

"I'm very happy about one thing," she said. "I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't come along. Once you let yourself in for a thing like that, the people in charge like to make sure you go through with it."

"Yeah," I said, remembering Borell's attitude when he discovered Diana in the car.

"Thank you for taking me with you," she said. "Another man might have left me there when that ape came over to the car." She paused. "You know, it's obvious that you dislike John Flower and everything he stands for. It's also obvious that Flower and Company do not like Larry Kent."

"Yet, like Daniel," I said. "I ambled right into the lion's den. Is that what's on your mind?"

"Exactly," she said. A smile flirted with her lips. "Perhaps I'm afraid of my own judgment."

"Meaning?"

"Well . . ."

Her lips parted in a smile. Her lips remained parted, even when she stopped smiling. There was the shine of her teeth and of her eyes, but the higher shine went out, slowly, as her eyes closed.

I did what came naturally. She answered my kiss with a steadily increasing pressure. Cupid played a tattoo on his bongo drums and an invisible musician threw in a sweet

violin. This, however, was a full orchestra job—but before all the boys could pitch in, Diana somehow got her hands between us and pushed at my chest.

"Take five," she said. She took a deep breath, added, "Please, Larry."

I took my arms from around her, slid back on the seat till I was again behind the wheel.

I said, "I think I know what you meant about being afraid of your own judgment."

"I don't like tawdry little love affairs," she said. "Passion on the seat of a car doesn't appeal to me. I'm sorry, Larry."

"Forget it," I said. "I put no price tag on this trip to the city."

Her eyes had been averted. Now she brought her gaze back to meet mine.

"I liked it," she said. "But you already know that, don't you? You should. You've been around."

"Yeah, Diana. I've been around, and I've learned one very important thing about women: each one is the same as another, but each one is different."

We both laughed. I turned the ignition key and roared the engine to life. The radio came back on. Before I could move into gear, she touched my arm.

"When I said I didn't like tawdry little love affairs," she breathed, "it wasn't that you . . . I mean . . ."

"Skip it," I said. "I've got cast iron feelings."

"No, Larry. I won't skip it. It's just that . . . well, we met only about an hour ago . . ."

"It's a long drive to the city," I said. "Do you think we can become really well acquainted before we get there?"

"It's possible," she said, nodding and smiling. "Unless you're a speed merchant."

"I'll stay under the speed limit all the way," I promised.

By the time Diana and I reached the outskirts of the city, we were old pals.

I found out that she had always wanted to be a model, but fashion houses demanded tall, gaunt women who didn't send the tape measure on too long a trip. Diana had out-

inched her way from that profession by quite a distance—and all of it was very nice territory.

I said, "Speaking for myself, you and I are now old friends, Diana."

"That" she said lightly, "is precisely what I've just been thinking."

"Then maybe you'll come to the Village and have a bite to eat. I know a nice little place."

"Thank you, Larry, but I'm afraid it's a little late."

"Okay" I agreed.

"But perhaps we can stop at a delicatessen," she suggested

"Sure thing. Do we have a picnic at your place or will you take a chance on my etchings?"

"Where do you live?" she asked. When I told her, she said. "We're less than half a mile from my apartment now. There's a delicatessen on the corner that stays open late."

"Fine Tell me where to point the car."

"Just keep going straight ahead. I'll let you know when to turn."

"Right."

We wound up on East 69th Street, near Central Park. I anchored the Plymouth near an all-night delicatessen and we went in and bought some sandwich material. We were on the sidewalk when she remembered she didn't have any drinks in the apartment, so I stopped at a gin mill down the street and bought a bottle of scotch from the bartender. It was five minutes shy of two o'clock when we climbed the steps to her apartment—four flights of them. She fished the key from her bag when we reached the top. I leaned against the wall, feeling like an overworked Himalayan goat.

I said, "This is a good way to discourage over-arduous friends"

She laughed and came close to me, but I was laden down with bags of food and was momentarily harmless.

She said, "You'll have plenty of time to get your strength back inside."

Her eyes went bright and big and her lips stretched into one of those Mona Lisa smiles and Cupid started banging

those bongo drums again. She made a kiss sound with her lips and brushed them against the tip of my nose, then she did a job on the door with the key, reached in and flicked on the lights. I followed her in.

It was a small apartment. One big room, a kitchen attached, a bathroom to the side. Nicely furnished. A big colour TV set, a hi-fi outfit. The couch was huge and comfortable looking. I went into the kitchen, dropped the stuff on the table, turned around—and she was waiting for me.

"Hello, old friend," she breathed.

I pulled her to me and even when she was close against me, she kept right on going. The bongo drums were now just about deafening.

"You'd better let me go," she said, "if you want something to eat."

"Food, at a time like this?"

"Vitamins," she said. "Haven't you heard what vitamins can do?"

Great girl, Diana. It wasn't what she said or the way she said it; it was what she didn't say, what she left to the imagination. I have a very vivid imagination.

"Make us a drink," she said. "Then go and sit down and wait till I make the sandwiches."

So, I poured a few scotches, added water. She was busy with the sandwiches when I handed her a drink.

"Outside in the other room and wait," she said. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

I went out and dropped onto the sofa. *That* was when I thought I was seeing double. I closed my eyes, but when I opened them again there they still were: *two* beds. I waited till she came in with the sandwiches before I asked her about it.

"Didn't I tell you?" she said. "I share this apartment with a girl friend, Sandra Arliss."

"And at what time does Sandra stroll in?" I asked.

"Well, she's a cigarette girl at the Kit Karson Klub. She usually finishes at about three in the morning."

I looked at my watch and groaned.

"But this happens to be her night off," she said. "On her nights off, Sandra likes to get around. Her current boy friend owns a luxury cruiser that he docks over on the Jersey side of the Hudson. You should see how that boat is outfitted. It's a lot more comfortable than most apartments."

"And a moored boat," I said, "has such a nice, gentle rolling motion."

Nice, gentle rolling motion. . . . She placed a tray of sandwiches on my lap and walked to the other end of the room, slowly. She turned to face me, saw I was all eyes, sat down on the bed. She made sitting down a beautiful production. She touched the bed, moved her fingers along the surface of the cover with a gentle, stroking motion.

"Eat your sandwiches," she said.

I took a king-sized bite.

"Slowly," she said, smiling. "It's not healthy to bolt down your food."

I dropped the rest of the sandwich onto the tray, placed the tray on the couch and got up.

"I've suddenly lost my appetite," I said.

But she lifted *her* sandwich. Being a gentleman—and because there's nothing more unromantic than kissing a dame who's munching a sandwich, I waited while she delicately worked over a corned beef with mustard on whole wheat. When she was finished, I had a scotch and water waiting for her. She drained it, handed me the glass and looked at me through lidded eyes.

"Hell," I said, and I dropped the glass and reached for her.

But she was like a will o' the wisp. In a flash she was on her feet and her hands were against my chest.

"Give me a minute to get into something comfortable," she said.

I let my hands drop to my sides. I felt like a big, awkward shmook at a high school dance. But Diana had a way of putting you at your ease. She smiled, made a little kiss sound and looked as cute as a kitten.

"Be patient just a little longer," she said. "A girl has to at least make a stab at playing hard to get."

I said, "If you'd rather I went home . . ."

"No," she said quickly. Her brow furrowed. "You do understand, don't you?"

It didn't matter whether I understood or not: Diana was a woman and that was that, but I nodded in the affirmative and that seemed to make her happy.

"I'll get into something nice and loose," she said. "Besides, I want to brush my teeth. I won't be more than a moment."

She opened a drawer, took out a box that had come from one of the city's most expensive lingerie houses, showed me the box.

"I haven't worn it yet," she said. "I bought it almost six months ago."

She went into the bathroom. I lit a cigarette. When she reappeared, she was wearing a creation that weighed no more than an ounce; it wasn't transparent, but it wasn't opaque, either. She walked to me, slowly, like something out of a very nice dream. She stopped when there was still a foot or so of space between us.

"Like me?" she asked.

Putting an answer into words seemed like a waste of time and effort. I bridged the twelve inches between us and put my arms around her.

"Larry," she breathed.

She wanted to say more, but I made it impossible. She answered my kiss with pressure of her own and suddenly our legs were too weak to hold us. I reached out and pulled the lamp cord. Dim light from the street filtered through the window curtains. This was the moment of truth . . .

But suddenly the room was fully illuminated.

A surprised looking blonde stood framed in the open doorway. I jumped up from the bed and Diana followed me. The blonde closed the door, tossed her purse onto a chair. Her surprised expression changed to one of full amusement.

"Well," she said. "Well, well, well. Trust little Sandra to stroll in at precisely the wrong moment."

"Sandra," Diana said, and then she made a few false

starts before coming out with, "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Mr. Larry Kent."

Sandra walked over to me and we shook hands. It seemed to me that she was doing her best to keep from laughing aloud.

"Your *very* good friend, I would say, Diana."

Diana made a few bad stabs at answering that one, so I rescued her: "We were playing a game of mental tic-tac-toe."

"I'd like you to teach me the rules one of these days, Mr. Kent. Or may I call you Larry?"

"Under the circumstances," I said, "we may as well be informal."

Sandra glanced at Diana, then her eyes lowered and took in the now-rumpled lingerie.

"We're certainly *dressed* informally," Sandra said. She looked at her wrist watch. "It's not *too* late. I could make a few rounds of the block, say, eight or nine laps?"

"I don't think that's necessary," Diana said.

"But I wouldn't like to be considered a spoil-sport, my dear."

I said, "I think Diana and I will take a rain-check on our game of tic-tac-toe."

"Well," Sandra said, shrugging, "you can't blame this interruption on me. If I'd been given some advance information, I'd've been only too happy to sit a few hours out on a stool in some cocktail lounge. However . . ."

"I thought you were going out with Roger tonight," Diana said.

"Roger? That's tomorrow night, dearie."

"But you have Sundays and Mondays off, don't you?"

"I did until last week. Now it's Sundays and Tuesdays. I thought I told you."

"I forgot," Diana said, looking miserable. Slowly, she lifted her gaze from the carpet till her eyes met mine. "I'm sorry, Larry."

"Forget it," I said. "I'm in the phone book, office and home numbers. Well, I think I'll be shoving off."

"Don't hurry on my account," Sandra said. "We could play a few games of three-handed bridge or something."

"I'll take a rain-check on that, too," I said.

"Suit yourself, Larry," Sandra said, but her eyes flashed another message.

She was wearing a satiny blue outfit that was cut into in the damndest places. Sandra was fighting a strenuous battle with the dress material—she was just bursting to get out, and the dress was losing the battle. If she coughed, that would have been the end of it.

"Don't be a stranger," Sandra said. "Feel free to drop in any time you like."

She made it sound like friendly flappancy, but a sharp glance from Diana to Sandra told me that Diana knew it was a lot more.

"I'll get in touch with you, Larry," Diana said.

"Be sure and do that," I said.

"Goodbye for now, Larry," Sandra said.

I mumbled something and hadn't the slightest idea in the world what the hell it was, and then I got out of there.

It had been quite a night. I drove home fast. All I wanted to do was put my head on the pillow and close my eyes. I certainly wasn't in any mood for company.

But someone had entered my apartment since I'd left to drive up to Connecticut. I could see light showing beneath the door, and I knew I'd snapped off the lights before I left. I slipped the .38 from my shoulder holster, turned the knob slowly, pushed quickly, flicked at the light switch with my left hand as I went by and then I hit the floor on my stomach in a shallow dive.

My visitor was Nick Flower.

I didn't have to use my gun. Nick had a knife—but it was stuck in his chest, right to the hilt.

2 . . . cold flesh . . .

One glance was all it took: Nick Flower was extremely deceased. A lot of things went quickly through my mind, but with every other mental entry came the question: Why, of all places in the world, was Nick Flower killed in my

apartment? I gave the knife a second glance and now it looked familiar. I went out to the kitchen. One of my knives was missing.

I lit a cigarette and, blowing smoke over Nick's head, started figuring what to do. The best thing of course would be to get rid of Nick, for the simple reason that his presence in my apartment was embarrassing—but it would be even more embarrassing if a boy in blue saw me carrying a rolled carpet over my shoulder and asked me to unroll it. So, I played it according to the book. I walked to the phone table, meaning to dial Central Police Headquarters. I had the phone in my hand but not off the cradle when the door opened.

The character who entered my apartment was one of the last people in the world I wanted to see. He had a face like a soft pear that had been dropped a couple of stories onto concrete. He had flaming red hair, murky blue eyes, was built like the side of a big house and he had a voice that could have doubled for a fog horn.

"Excuse us for not pressing the buzzer, Kent . . ."

His murky eyes flicked from me and went to Nick Flower. He walked over to Nick and then a skinny guy in a suit that flapped over his bones followed him in, closing the door behind him. The second man had nothing in his face and he walked in the stiff up-and-down fashion of an ex-beat cop. I'd never seen him before, but I knew Pear Face; he was Sergeant of Detectives Eli Bogg.

Bogg grabbed Nick's limp left hand, held onto it for a few seconds, let it go. He grunted, turned to me.

"Deat."

"That's one point I'm not going to argue," I said.

"You know who he is?" Bogg asked.

"Yeah. His name's Nick Flower."

"Flower?" The magic name made Bogg lick at his lips. "Not . . .?"

"John Flower's cousin," I said. "Five years ago he was sent up to Sing Sing for ten years on a multiple manslaughter charge. He did something to buy off the rest of his sentence and they let him out of the Castle this afternoon."

Bogg said, "Why'd you do it, Kent?"

"Check the blood on his shirt," I said. "You'll see that

it's gone brown. That means it's dried out, congealed. In other words, he didn't die just a couple of minutes ago."

"So?"

"I just got in a couple of minutes ago. Somebody had skeleton-keyed into my apartment. *That* was the reason . . . they planted Nick on me."

Bogg sucked on his teeth. The skinny dick put his hands behind his back and tried to look intelligent.

"I was going to call *you*," I said. "Maybe not you personally, but whoever happened to be on duty at General Headquarters."

"So you could report finding Nick Flower, eh?"

"That's right."

"You say Nick Flower got out of Sing Sing this afternoon?"

"Yeah."

"And now he's here in your apartment, with a knife through his heart."

"My kitchen knife."

"Well! This one gets easier and easier."

"Sorry, but I'll have to disappoint you, sergeant."

Bogg scratched at his scalp. "How come you knew Nick Flower was getting out of Sing Sing today?"

"John Flower told me."

"Told you? You sent John Flower's cousin up the river. That put you right on his bad smell list. Why the hell should he tell you that Nick was getting out of Sing Sing?"

"It's a long story," I said.

"How about putting it on paper for me?" Bogg said.

I thought about that for a minute or so before saying, "You're still working with Lieutenant Alexander. From what you told your partner, Alexander will be taking over this case in the morning. So, I think I'll wait and give *him* my statement."

Bogg did the impossible—he made his face look even uglier with a snarl.

"Maybe," he said, "you'd like to cool your heels in a nice, damp cell and wait for Lieutenant Alexander to get around to you in the morning?"

"If you're arresting me," I said, "I want a charge made out and I want to contact my lawyer."

Where Lieutenant Alexander was concerned, Sergeant Eli Bogg was a big, stupid puppy, over-eager to please. I knew about their strange relationship. Practically everybody in the city knew. Lieutenant Xerxes Alexander was a police egg-head. Three nights a week he lectured on criminology at Fordham University. He was an expert on crime and his knowledge went back to the beginning of recorded history. But criminology wasn't Alexander's only subject. He was one of those guys who can pick up a book and recall everything worth remembering, right down to the smallest detail. If there is such a thing as a photographic memory, that was what Lieutenant Alexander had. Sergeant Eli Bogg, of course, was another type entirely. Bogg had been a great college and professional football player, though how he got through college without the formality of appearing for examinations had been a scholastic scandal during his senior university year. Bogg was now the stalwart of the New York City Police Department bowling team with an average just under 250. His only other claim to fame was that he was the one man in the world whom Lieutenant Alexander trusted. It was common knowledge that Bogg just about idolized Alexander. Some said he was impressed by his superior's high intelligence; others claimed that Alexander had once saved Bogg's life and so Bogg was now devoting his life to serving and protecting Alexander; and I've heard a newspaper reporter theorize that everybody in this world must love somebody else, and as Bogg was an orphan with a face no dame with good vision could possibly love, so he directed all his affection towards Alexander.

I didn't know the real reason for the affinity between the pair, but I did know that you couldn't hurt one without hurting the other—especially if it was Alexander you hurt. A thug had once answered Alexander back during a grill season and Bogg had punched him right through a window; luckily, the grill room had been only a few feet above the sidewalk.

Anyhow, there I was, with Nick Flower dead in my favourite chair and Sergeant Eli Bogg a foot away from

me, very much alive and wondering how he could give me the business. The dick with the nothing face had phoned the police coroner and was now leaning against the door.

At last, Bogg said to me, "You got home here just before I arrived with Scotty, eh?"

"A matter of a couple of minutes before," I said, wearily.

"Then how about the witness, eh?" he demanded, triumph touching at his eyes and voice.

Now Bogg was getting to something in which I was very interested: the reason why he and his blank-faced friend had come to my apartment. This was something I wanted to know badly, but I was afraid that if I let Bogg know *how* badly, he would slip into character and clam up.

"Witness?" I said, innocently. "That wouldn't be a bluff, would it, sergeant? You don't have any witness."

"Then it must have been a ghost who phoned us and said the two guys were over near that window." He nodded in the direction of the big window that overlooked the street, "and that one guy had a knife in his hand."

So that was it. A phone call. I could have found this out by playing wordsy-wordsy at headquarters with Bogg, but then I might have had to say something that could be twisted around to mean something else later on. Cops, of course, can lie like hell about what guys say, but I've learned that most of them stick pretty close to the truth when it's murder—unless they're dealing with someone they're *sure* is guilty. When the latter is the case they'll do and say anything to get their man. But I was a private investigator who'd never been caught doing the wrong thing, and while Bogg had every reason to disapprove of me as a fellow citizen, he had no reason to be positive that I'd cold-bloodedly slipped a knife into Nick Flower. He could suspect me; he could even be almost convinced I'd killed Nick Flower in a fight—but this last would be manslaughter and not murder. At any rate, there are times to talk and there are times to pull the zipper across your mouth. I zipped.

"What about it?" Bogg asked after a while. "How about a statement?"

"I'd like to wake up my lawyer," I said.

Bogg looked at his partner, who caught his glance but gave back absolutely nothing in return.

"Well?" I said. "Can I use the phone? Are you going to pull me in on a murder charge . . . or are you going to wait and see what Lieutenant Alexander has to say about the situation?"

My mention of the lieutenant was what did it. Bogg wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and came to a decision: "I'm going to ask you not to leave this apartment till you hear from us."

"Fair enough," I said. "I guess I'll be hearing in the morning?"

"You'll be hearing," Bogg promised.

He clamped his lips together and I could see that Bogg was zippering his mouth for reasons similar to my own; he didn't want to say anything that I could turn to my advantage later on.

I sat down and watched Bogg go through the motions of a detective at the scene of a murder—a look through the other rooms, a survey of ash trays and so forth. He had just made an examination of the bathroom when the door buzzer went. Nothing Face opened the door and a fat little man with a grumpy expression entered the apartment.

"Hello, doc," Bogg said.

The coroner nodded, grunted, glanced at the late Nick Flower.

"That's him," Bogg said.

The coroner grunted again, put his black bag on a table, went to Nick Flower. He lifted one of Flower's eyelids, had a look at the dead eye and nodded.

"Yes, yes, yes," he said as though having proved something to himself.

The coroner went through his examination efficiently and quickly. He jotted down his findings in a note pad, returned his things to the black bag, closed the bag with a snap and turned to Bogg.

"Has the identification been made?" the coroner asked.

"The guy is Nick Flower," Bogg said. "Cousin of John Flower."

The coroner made a clucking sound.

"This is a funny one," the coroner said. "A very funny one. I'm almost certain that the body was . . ."

"Hold it," Bogg interrupted. "We can talk about that someplace else."

The coroner blinked his eyes, looked at me.

"This," Bogg said, "is Larry Kent. He's a private investigator. This is his apartment."

"Oh," the coroner said. "I see, I see."

"Come on," Bogg said. "We'll go downstairs." He looked at Nothing Face. "Stay here with Kent till the morgue boys come and collect Flower. I'll radio for them from the car."

"What'll I do after the morgue boys take the body away?" Nothing Face asked.

"Use your head," Bogg said, looking positively disgusted. "We'll want Kent in the morning."

"But I don't . . ." Understanding finally dawned on the skinny detective. "Oh, yeah. Okay, sergeant. I get you."

"Let's go," Bogg said to the coroner.

The little fat man threw me a parting glance and grunted. Bogg blinked his eyes at me, opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it and headed for the door. Nothing Face held the door open as the coroner and Bogg walked out, then he closed the door and stood there with his back against it. He looked at me, shrugged, crossed his arms over his chest and focussed his eyes on a fly spot on the ceiling.

"Would you like some coffee?" I asked.

"I better not," he said.

"I'm going to put on a pot," I said. "A cup or two might help keep you awake while you stand across the street and watch this apartment. It's quite a few hours till relief time in the morning."

"The guys from the morgue will be here in about fifteen minutes," he said.

"I'll have the coffee ready in less than ten."

"Maybe a quick cup," he said.

So I made a pot of coffee and brought the sad sack detective a cup from the kitchen. He took six lumps from the sugar bowl and dumped them into the steaming black liquid.

"I used to have a sweet tooth," he said. "Now I've got false choppers."

This was his idea of a joke. I made him happy by laughing. He beamed as he sipped at the coffee.

"Another one?" I asked.

"Well . . ." He hesitated. "No. I don't think so."

"Look," I said. "It gets cool just before dawn and you haven't a topcoat. Why don't you stay here in the kitchen all night? Have as much coffee as you want. I'm going to bed. As long as you have to keep an eye on me, why not do it the easy way?"

But this was something beyond Nothing Face's ken. Legmen aren't supposed to do *anything* the easy way.

"I've got to be going," he said.

He exited. I smiled, but then I thought of my predicament and that wiped the smile from my face. No matter how you measured it, I was in a spot. I wasn't worried about being charged with Nick Flower's murder, because Nick's skin had been cool to the touch when I found his body. The blood on his shirt had congealed. He'd been dead at least an hour and a half. All I had to do was prove that I'd been with Diana till two a.m. and I was in the clear. My predicament, the way I saw it, had to do with John Flower. After the way I'd brushed his offer aside, he was going to be very nasty indeed; when he learned that Nick Flower had been found dead in my apartment, he wasn't going to bother with rational thinking.

I thought of phoning Diana, but she was probably asleep. Plenty of time to get my alibi fixed the next day—if I needed it. I brushed my teeth and went to bed. But sleep wouldn't come. I kept wondering why the hell Nick Flower should be found dead in my apartment, only hours after being released from prison. Finally, I got up and swallowed a sleeping pill. Now was the time for sleep. Worry was for the next day. I counted a few hundred sheep and then I couldn't see them through a sudden swirl of fog. I closed my eyes.

The door buzzer was going crazy. A series of ear-pricking buzzes then a long, continuous assault on my ear drums.

The buzzing persisted till I opened the door, when

Sergeant Eli Bogg pulled his finger from the button. Nothing Face was with him, and there were heavy sacs under his bloodshot eyes.

"Get dressed," Bogg said. "Lieutenant Alexander will be at Central Headquarters at twenty minutes to nine and he wants you to be there when he arrives."

"Come in and sit down," I said, real friendly like. "I'll have a quick shave and a shower. I'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

Bogg snarled and looked at his watch.

"That's the limit of the time I'll give you," he said. "Fifteen minutes and then we're leaving." He turned to Nothing Face. "You can shove off now."

Nothing Face nodded, turned and started down the stairs. Bogg slammed the door.

"Am I going to be charged with murder?" I asked.

"I've got nothing to say," Bogg mumbled. "Except get moving."

I made a quick thing of a shave and shower, got into a fresh suit, selected a bright tie and put it back on the tie rack in favour of a subdued one. Lieutenant Alexander didn't like ostentation; a bright tie might put him in the wrong frame of mind from the word go. I knotted the plain brown tie, grabbed my hat and went out to the living room. Bogg was sitting down. He got to his feet when he saw me. I'd taken just a little less than fourteen minutes, but Bogg didn't seem to appreciate my speed. If anything, he looked just a little disappointed. Maybe he wanted a good reason for getting sore at me. But I was determined not to give him any.

"Nice suit you're wearing," I said, even though it wasn't. "Just right for you." I added. "That shade of grey is your colour."

Bogg curled his lip like I'd insulted him.

"Let's get moving," he snarled. "Lieutenant Alexander will probably be waiting for us when we get there."

We went down to the street. An unmarked police car was standing at the kerb, a plainclothesman behind the wheel. We climbed in and the chauffeur moved the taxpayers' buggy into the morning rush hour traffic stream.

Lieutenant Alexander *wasn't* waiting for us at Central Headquarters. We arrived there at a little before a quarter of nine and went straight to Alexander's office. It wasn't the usual cop's office. It was set out more along the lines of a successful businessman's inner sanctum. Blonde wood pannelling, a modernistic desk, a few good paintings on the walls, tasteful curtains across the windows, some comfortable leather chairs, a lemon-coloured filing cabinet, the newest in dictating machines. There was even a deep pile rug on the floor.

I sat down and Bogg made a noise through his nose. The impression I got was that Bogg didn't think I qualified for a comfortable seat, but he said nothing about it. He took a cigar from his case, put it in his mouth and sat down, not bothering to light the cigar.

The man who entered the office would never have been type cast as a lieutenant of detectives. A world-famous author maybe, or a senator or businessman or judge. Xerxes Alexander was tall and slim. His white hair was thick. His thin face was finely moulded, almost handsome. But it was his eyes that you noticed first. They were an icy grey-blue, deep set. The intelligence of this man was there in his eyes, and so were a lot of other things: courage, resourcefulness, egotism and just a touch of good humour—but only a touch.

Xerxes Alexander held his homburg in his right hand. Bogg moved forward and took the homburg from his superior.

"Thank you," Alexander said with an easy smile. "Good morning, Eli."

"Good morning, Lieutenant," Bogg said.

Bogg placed the homburg on a hat tree like it was a rare and fragile thing that was liable to fall apart. Alexander looked at me, the smile still on his lips.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," I said.

"How are you, Mr. Kent," he purred. "Nice of you to come and see me."

I didn't bother telling him that Bogg and Bogg alone was responsible for my being in the office. Alexander went to his desk and sat down. Some typewritten pages were neatly arranged on the desk blotter. Alexander glanced at them, lifted his eyes to meet my gaze, smiled.

"You will excuse me, Mr. Kent?"

"Of course," I said.

Alexander went through five typewritten pages in less than two minutes. When he was finished, he placed the pages neatly together and dropped them in the "hold" basket on his desk. He placed his hands before him, moved them towards each other so that the fingertips touched—then back and forth, back and forth went his hands. His eyes seemed focussed on something far beyond the room and he stayed like that, lost in thought for almost five minutes.

Alexander was doing some deep thinking, but he was also working on me. He was giving me the silent treatment. I knew it and he knew I knew it, but he still gave it to me and I couldn't help getting just a little fidgety.

When Alexander finally ended his stare into space, he turned his gaze in my direction. Still he didn't speak. I was conscious of Bogg's heavy breathing, the sound of traffic in the street outside. I even imagined I could hear the ticking of my wrist watch. And I could almost feel Alexander's pale eyes boring into mine. I stared right back at him, forcing myself to keep from blinking my eyes or turning away. There wasn't a movement in his face; holding his gaze was a tremendous effort that got tougher and tougher for me. Just when I figured one of us *had* to break, he spoke.

"I understand, Mr. Kent, that you disliked the deceased, Nicholas Flower?"

"I disliked him very much," I said. "He was a thick-headed thug who enjoyed pushing his weight around."

A wintry smile stretched at Alexander's lips.

"I agree, Mr. Kent. Nicholas Flower was indeed a low principled thug. However, the evidence that he was murdered is indisputable. Murder, I have no need to remind you, is a capital crime regardless of the low character of the victim."

There was no need for me to answer. What Alexander said was as elementary as the fact that two plus two equals four. He was just feeling me out, probing and exploring like a prize-fighter in the first round who flicks out light left jabs that have no chance of connecting.

Alexander gestured vaguely in the direction of his "hold"

basked "I have just read the coroner's preliminary report on Nicholas Flower, Mr. Kent. The coroner arrived at your apartment at two-twenty-two a.m. He examined the body. According to his opinion, which I have learned to respect, Nicholas Flower had been dead for at least one hour and possibly as long as two hours and thirty minutes. Now, Sergeant Bogg reports that he arrived at your apartment, after receiving a certain telephone call, at very shortly after two a.m. This would suggest that Nicholas Flower had been dead at least forty minutes or so previous to Sergeant Bogg's arrival at your apartment."

I said, "If Sergeant Bogg had been five minutes earlier, he'd have arrived at my apartment before I did."

"You claim, then, that you did not see Nicholas Flower alive?"

"The last time I saw Nick Flower alive," I said, "was a little more than five years ago, in Police Court Number Two, when he was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for multiple manslaughter."

"At which time you gave evidence against the deceased—evidence that alone was responsible for his being found guilty."

"That's right," I said.

"Then it's reasonable to assume, Mr. Kent, that Nicholas Flower harboured a grudge against you."

"There's no doubt of that. Nick didn't make a secret of the fact that he hated my insides."

"Which would seem to give Nicholas Flower a motive for murdering you, Mr. Kent."

"I guess it would."

"However," Alexander said, smiling lightly, "it is Nicholas Flower who is dead. Now, if you had been murdered a matter of hours after Nicholas Flower's release from prison, I would unhesitatingly consider Mr. Flower to be a prime suspect. But it happens to be the other way round. It's very puzzling, to say the least, Mr. Kent. I would be most grateful if you would clear yourself to my satisfaction. I could then concentrate my efforts in what I hope would prove to be more fruitful directions."

"Are you going to charge me with murder?" I asked.

Alexander smiled.

"Mr. Kent, my function is to apprehend killers, not manufacture them. A murdered man has been found in your apartment. but this does not say that you are guilty of the murder. I have no desire to waste your no doubt valuable time, Mr. Kent. If I waste your time, then I am wasting my own, too. Time is a factor in life which cannot be controlled; therefore, I try to spend it as intelligently as possible. I'm sure you agree that the sooner I exclude you as a suspect, the sooner I can proceed to more . . . er . . . practical and rewarding pursuits."

"I merely want you to tell me all that transpired last night, Mr. Kent, beginning, say, oh, perhaps twelve hours before your discovery of the body."

"I spent the afternoon at the Mid City Turkish Bath," I said, slowly, and as I spoke I came to a decision—I would give Alexander a true account of what had happened, but I'd leave out certain incidentals, including my little affair with Diana Marsh. All I had to do was prove I'd been at John Flower's Connecticut place and the rest would take care of itself. So I gave him the story.

When I'd finished, he picked up a pencil and made little circles on a scratch pad. He painstakingly drew a seventh circle and then he said: "This is very strange indeed. You say that John Flower, cousin of the deceased, asked you to drive up to his Connecticut home, where he offered you money if you would stay away from his cousin?"

"That's right," I said.

Alexander said, "I had a talk with someone this morning—that was what made me arrive here in my office a little later than usual."

He turned from me and smiled at his errand-and-muscle boy. "Sergeant Bogg, please go next door to room 21. You'll find a gentleman there. Kindly escort him here."

Bogg bobbed his head up and down eagerly and left the office. Alexander gave me a bland smile that raised goose pimples on the back of my neck. A minute or so passed, then the door opened and in walked Sergeant Bogg, behind him John Flower.

Flower had eyes only for me—cold, narrowed eyes.

"I understand," Alexander said to Flower, "that you and Mr. Kent are acquainted."

"We know each other," Flower said thinly.

Alexander said to me, "Mr. Flower was waiting here at headquarters when I arrived. It seems he learned from a friend that his cousin had been murdered."

I said, "A friend here at Central Police Headquarters?"

A slight nod from Alexander acknowledged that I was right.

"Mr. Flower," I said, "has quite a few friends in official circles."

"You'd better have some yourself," Flower said. "You're going to need them."

I didn't like the expression on Flower's face.

"I have one question for you, Mr. Flower," Alexander said. "I would appreciate an immediate and truthful answer."

"Go right ahead, Lieutenant," Flower said, but his eyes were on me.

"Very well. Here is the question. When did you last see Mr. Kent?"

Flower frowned as though concentrating deeply. The goose pimples on the back of my neck started circulating.

I said "Don't fracture any of your grey cells, Flower."

"I think it was at Madison Square Garden the last time I saw Kent," Flower said. "It was in the crowd outside after the Manello-Kelly fight. That was about, oh, a little over six months ago."

"I was thinking in terms of something more recent," Alexander said.

"I don't get into the city much these days," Flower said.

"Sure" Alexander said, and he looked at me, raising his eyebrows.

I said, "I want my lawyer."

"Certainly," Alexander said, smiling. He lifted his phone from the cradle. "Here you are, Mr. Kent."

I dialled my lawyer's number. He was Claude C. Rupert, a former cop, who had no particular love for his ex-colleagues. His secretary put me through to him and he asked me what was wrong.

"I'm in trouble," I said into the phone, and I looked at Lieutenant Alexander.

"Suspicion of murder," Alexander said with a crisp little smile.

I relayed the information to Ruppert and he said he'd be with me in a matter of minutes. Bogg took the phone from me and cradled it.

"Please look after Mr. Kent," Alexander said to Bogg.

"I sure will," Bogg said happily.

Bogg gave me a little push towards the door. I stopped in front of Flower. There was triumph in his eyes and he threw it at me.

I said, "Maybe you're not quite as smart as you figure."

"You killed my cousin," Flower said. "Don't expect me to lie to help you off a murder rap."

Bogg gave me another push to the door. We walked down to the charge room and went through the usual paper formalities, then Bogg took me to one of the detention cells.

"You're really in for it," Bogg said as he closed the door.

I didn't answer. I sat down on the cot and lit a cigarette. Bogg watched me for a minute or so and then he went away.

I wasn't surprised by Flower's refusal to provide me with the makings of an alibi, but I wasn't very worried about it, either. I had too many things working for me. There was Diana, there was Sandra, and there were some of the guys I'd recognised at Flower's Connecticut shindig. I couldn't depend on Flower's monkeys, of course — they'd say just what Flower wanted them to say.

Claude Ruppert arrived just as I was grinding out my second cigarette on the floor. The guard let him into the cell. Briefly—leaving out Diana again—I gave Ruppert the details. As I spoke, he shook his head and made clucking little noises like a lawyer. A lawyer is a guy who never fails to give you the impression that he's bucking against gigantic forces in handling your case. When I was finished, Ruppert took out a note pad and started asking questions. I supplied the answers and he jotted them down and after a while he closed up his note pad and called for the guard.

"I am going to see about arranging bail," Ruppert said. "Of course, this will be just a formality—the police always

violently oppose the allowance of bail when the charge is murder. However, I'll make application and perhaps I can learn a few things about the case against you in the process. You can rest assured . . ."

"Save it for the next client, Claude. Just go through the motions and, when you're finished, come back here. By then I might have an angle for you to work on."

No lawyer likes to be told how to operate and Claude Ruppert was no exception, but he buttoned his lip and left the cell. I lay back on the cot and put some facts in order. The guys I'd seen at Flower's girly-girly party were Frank Archer, one of the bright young juniors from the District Attorney's office; Bruce Wiggan, an alderman on the City Council; and Judge Henry Hamlin of the Criminal Court. I figured Frank Archer to be the best guy to work on—but only if Diana Marsh and/or Sandra Arliss was unavailable. A solid alibi was all I needed for Lieutenant Alexander to drop his suspicion of murder tag. I decided to tell Ruppert to get in touch with Diana or Sandra, preferably Diana. I smiled. John Flower used pretty dames to sugar up guys he wanted in his hip pocket, but here was one little lollipop who was going to prove real sticky. Then I started wondering why Nick Flower's body had been in my apartment, and other things, like: did John Flower actually believe I'd killed Nick? *Who* had killed him? Why? My mind went back to the multiple manslaughter case that had sent Nick up the river. The guys killed by Nick's car hadn't been angels. All three had been in trouble with the cops at one time or another; two had served gaol sentences for robbery. Could it be that one of their friends or relatives had been waiting to get revenge on Nick? Of course, Nick Flower's murder *should be* strictly police business . . . but I'd been cold-decked right into the middle of it and so it was now mine, too.

Well, worrying wasn't going to get me anywhere. I hadn't had much sleep the night before, so I closed my eyes and took a nap. I was awakened by the sound of the cell door opening.

Claude Ruppert entered the cell. I have never seen a more puzzled lawyer than Ruppert was at that moment.

"I don't understand it," Ruppert mumbled, "I just don't understand it."

"Understand what?"

"The police did not oppose my bail application. You have been awarded verbal bail of two thousand dollars. All you have to do is come upstairs and sign out."

I didn't understand it, either, but I wasn't going to stick around and give the cops time to change their minds. I got into my coat and hustled upstairs with Ruppert. Outside on the street, Ruppert began making more sounds like a lawyer. I told him I'd get in touch with him and I hit the road, grabbing the first cab that came my way.

I gave the driver Diana Marsh's address. It was a little after one p.m. when he let me out. I remembered that Diana had told me she was a beautician, so she probably wouldn't be home for quite a while. But Sandra Arliss was a cigarette girl at the Kit Karson Klub. This would be her sleeping time. Waking her up seemed like a very interesting idea.

3 . . . there is no truth . . .

I pressed and pressed against the door button, heard chimes sound again and again inside the apartment, but the door that clicked open was across the hall.

An old harridan in a too-big floral patterned dressing gown peeped out at me from behind her half-open door.

"Hmph!" she said, following up with, "They're both out- If they were in, I'd know about it."

"I guess you would," I said.

She slammed the door and shot home the bolt.

There was a gin mill across the street. I went there, ordered a double scotch and borrowed the phone book. Judge Henry Hamlin, Frank Archer, Bruce Wiggan. The latter two might be at the D.A.'s office and City Hall respectively, but the judge could be at home. I dialled all their home numbers, figuring that John Flower's shindig may have left them all incapable of appearing for duty that morning. Bruce Wiggan's phone rang for a minute. I hit

the hook and dialled the home of Frank Archer, the junior at the D.A.'s office. A dame with a lah-de-dah voice answered.

"This is Mrs. Frank Archer speaking."

I wondered how Mrs. Archer would react to news of her husband's pécadillos at Flower's party, but I resisted the temptation to put the finger on her spouse. Pretending to be secretary to the Mayor, I asked to speak to her husband, but she told me he'd gone to the office. I thanked her and hung up.

Last, I dialled Judge Hamlin's home number, heard the phone buzz and click and then a woman's voice answering: "This is Joyce Hamlin speaking."

A phone wire can do tricks to the human voice, but I was willing to bet a dollar to nothing that the dame at the other end was exactly like what she sounded: tall, well put together, pretty and romantically inclined.

I said, "This is the Mayor's secretary. May I speak with Judge Hamlin? It's very important."

"I'm sorry," her voice filtered through, "but my father was on the bench this morning. Could I take a . . ." She stopped, went on, "Please hold the line. My father's car is coming up the drive now."

"I'll ring back later," I said, and hooked the phone.

Judge Hamlin's residence was in the upper Bronx. A taxi ride there ate up a week's coffee and cigarette money. A judge makes about twenty thousand a year. The judge's residence would fetch at least a hundred and fifty grand on the real estate market. You don't buy that kind of property on twenty thousand a year unless you have another source of income . . . like cash-filled envelopes from messenger boys sent around by John Flower.

I rapped the brass door knocker and echoes from inside the house came back to slap the door. The echoes died and then the door opened. A tall dame with sleepy eyes looked me up and down like she might decide to buy me if the price was right.

"Yes?" she said, a slow smile stretching at her full lips. "What is it?"

It was the same voice I'd heard over the phone and Joyce Hamlin looked like her voice sounded. She was a

little on the tall side and *extremely* well put together. Only the last part of my original character analysis couldn't be proved without testing under actual conditions.

"I'd like to see the judge," I said.

"Is my father expecting you?"

"Well, no. But it's important that I see him."

"What do you want to see my father about?" she asked.

"It's personal," I said.

"Don't you ever discuss personal things?"

"Only with the person involved."

She laughed—and I got a real strong whiff of gin.

"Come in," she said.

I did. She stood close to me. She was wearing a light-weight dress with a deeply scalloped neckline. She'd been doing a lot of lounging around and the dress was creased in the damndest places, but on her it looked good. Even a burlap sack looks all right when a woman is built to the correct proportions. She had a cleft in the centre of her chin and deep dimples in her cheeks. Her long, dark hair was untidy all over the place, but it had the effect of making her look even more attractive in a gypsy sort of way.

"I think I like you," she said.

"When will you be sure?" I asked.

She threw back her head and laughed without restraint. Then, suddenly, she stopped laughing and her eyelids went low. Her voice was low, too: "See my father later on. He's busy in his den on a book he's writing. He said he wasn't to be disturbed for at least another hour. Have a few drinks with me while you're waiting."

I said, "You're sure your father left orders not to be disturbed?"

"Do you think I'd tell a lie?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, for your information, I would." She giggled. "But it so happens that I'm not. Come on and have those drinks, eh?"

"A pleasure," I said.

We walked into a small, cosy room. There was a love seat, in front of which sat a bottle-laden coffee table. A few

over-stuffed chairs, a TV set, radio and a hi-fi cabinet completed the furnishings.

She bent low to give me a drink and then I realized how deeply cut the scalloped front really was. I received irrefutable evidence that here was a little lady who required no help from the foam rubber people. But she bent too low, overbalanced! I got up fast, caught her around the waist and checked her fall.

"How strong you are," she said, winking.

"Better sit down," I said.

"Sit me down," she said, almost challengingly.

I lifted her.

"Do me a favour," she said, her moist lips brushing against my cheek as she spoke.

"What's that?"

Put me down, but stay down with me. I like sitting on the floor."

This was when she started to prove, beyond the tiniest vestige of a doubt, the accuracy of the last part of my character analysis. A shiver went through her and she dug her nails into my back.

"Kiss me," she pleaded. "For heaven's sake, kiss me, kiss me—like you mean it!"

I kissed her and that was it—the detonator.

When the fire was out, I poured her a family-size gin and tonic. She lay back, smiling, her lids heavy. There was a languorous ease about her, like a happy, purring, well-fed cat.

"This is one of my good days," she said. "One of my nice days."

"Drink up," I said.

She took down half of the gin and tonic like it was so much lolly water.

"Do you have bad days?" I asked.

"Terrible ones," she said, frowning. "Dark days. Have you ever been sick and tired of yourself?"

I started feeling sorry for the dame. She was a gin-soaked nymph, but there was something soft and appealing, even childlike about her.

"Yeah." I said. "There have been days when I've felt sick and tired of myself. Lots of them."

"I have a lot of days like that, too," she said. She drained the last of the gin and tonic, handed me the empty glass with a smile

"Maybe you've had enough," I said.

"Same again," she said. "Right to the top. Please don't argue"

"It'll knock you for a loop," I said.

"I'm hoping it will," she said, and now her words were slurring together. "Promise me something?"

"Sure" I said.

"Come and see me again. Please?"

"Sure," I said, but I didn't know if I meant it.

"I believe you," she said. She smiled lop-sidedly. "But then, I've believed a lot of people who've let me down."

"I won't let you down," I said, and now I almost believed I meant it

She took the drink from me, sipped, smiled.

"When I was a little girl, I used to love the beach. Not crowded beaches. Lonely ones. Miles and miles of sand and no people. I don't like people." She touched my arm. "You're not people."

"Thanks," I said.

She closed her eyes.

"I'm tired," she said.

I took the glass from her hand, placed it on the table.

"First door to your right," she mumbled.

"First door?"

"My father's den. I don't like my father. He's a fake. My mother's even worse. She goes away all the time. She doesn't care about my father being a fake. I'm a fake, too . . . I . . ."

She was asleep. I kissed her forehead and I imagined that her face went soft and innocent. I made her as comfortable as possible on the love seat and then I looked at her. The world I thought, is loaded with unhappy people, all running in the wrong direction.

I left her, turned right outside the room, knocked on the first door to my right.

"Yes!" came a gruff voice behind the door.

I entered Judge Hamlin's den. He was seated at a huge walnut desk, a pile of handwritten pages before him. Joyce had said he was writing a book. His memoirs, no doubt. I stifled a sarcastic laugh. His genuine memoirs would send him to gaol.

The judge's thick, silvery hair was a halo over a sternly handsome face. Piercing grey eyes, a wide forehead, a straight nose, firm lips and a strong chin. A face that engendered respect—but I knew otherwise.

"How did you get in here?" the judge demanded.

"Your daughter, Joyce, pointed the room out to me. She told me to come straight in. She's not feeling too well. As a matter of fact, she didn't even ask for my name. It's . . ."

"You needn't tell me, Mr. Kent," the judge cut in. "You appeared as a witness in my court on a few occasions."

I said, "Did you recognise me last night, at John Flower's place?"

"I knew you were there," Hamlin said.

"Do you know what happened to me after I got back to the city?" I asked.

He nodded.

I said, "Then you know about Nick Flower's body in my apartment."

"Quite," the judge said crisply.

"Lieutenant Alexander of Central Police Headquarters hauled me in this morning," I said. "He locked me up on suspicion of murder after John Flower claimed I hadn't appeared at his Connecticut place the other night."

"I am aware of that," Hamlin said.

"You can supply me with an alibi," I told him. "Your word would be accepted against Flower's, and you'd save me what could be a hell of a lot of trouble. All you have to do is come to Central Headquarters with me . . ."

"And commit professional and social suicide?" the judge asked.

"Then you refuse to help me?"

"I've already given you all the assistance I'm prepared to give. You see, if it weren't for me, Mr. Kent, you would still be in that cell. I used my influence to have your application for bail accepted. I'm a careful man, but not a

heartless one I know you did not murder Nick Flower and I'm giving you a chance to come up with evidence that will prove your innocence."

"Big deal," I said. "I guess I'm supposed to be grateful for what you did for me."

"I didn't have to do a solitary thing," Hamlin said. "However . . ."

"Yeah," I said. "You're an honourable man who likes to see a sucker get an even break. But aren't you afraid I'll be able to prove that you were playing sugar daddy to a call girl at John Flower's joint?"

"You would be extremely foolish to try such a thing," Hamlin said. "You are in a difficult position, Mr. Kent. If you have as much intelligence as I think you have, you will concentrate all your efforts toward extricating yourself. Be thankful that I was fair-minded enough to help you gain the temporary freedom that should enable you, if you employ the right tactics, to prove beyond a doubt that you did not kill Nick Flower. I think I have been more than generous in this matter, Mr. Kent."

"Sit off the bench," I said. "If you gave me any help at all—and I'm not sure you did—your motivation was a guilty conscience and nothing else."

Judge Hamlin wore his courtroom look of severity.

"I will not be spoken to in this fashion, Mr. Kent! Need I remind you of my position? I am senior judge of the Criminal Court . . ."

"Who should be passing sentence on himself," I said. I looked at the handwritten pages on his desk. "If that's your memoirs, why don't you try telling the truth? You'd have a nice, dirty story that would top every best-seller list in the country."

The judge did some spluttering.

"As for sex," I said, "you could fill a couple of hundred pages with what happened last night."

"Get out of here!" the judge ordered, getting to his feet and pointing dramatically at the door.

I was mad enough to throw some insults concerning the judge's unhappy daughter, but I choked back the words.

"Get out!" the judge thundered.

"A good idea," I said. "It's getting so I can't stand the smell in here"

The judge spluttered some more. When I closed the door behind me, he was threatening to have my license revoked and my bail cancelled.

I looked in on Joyce. She was fast asleep. I went to the front door

"Kent!" came the judge's voice behind me.

I turned. He was standing outside his den shaking his fist.

"Come here again," he shouted, "and I'll have you arrested!"

I slammed the front door behind me—just as hard as I could.

Next stop. City Hall.

Alderman Bruce Wiggan had an office just down the hall from the mayor of the city. A dame with a long nose sat primly at a desk, pecking away at a typewriter in Bruce Wiggan's outer office. The dame looked up from the typewriter, saw me, pecked away to the end of the sentence and leaned back in her swivel chair.

"Yes!" she said.

I said, "My name is Larry Kent and I'd like to see Alderman Wiggan on important business."

"That makes two of us," she said, her smile showing me at least five hundred dollars worth of china.

I lifted my eyebrows in a question mark.

"Mr. Wiggan," she said, "was scheduled to speak at a businessmen's banquet and a boys' club rally tonight. I would like to know how I can adequately apologize for his inability to appear at this late hour. These jobs are always left to secretaries. I take the abuse, Alderman Wiggan takes the vacation. The rat race of New York for me, the warm sun of Arizona for him."

"Arizona?" I said.

"Or perhaps California, or Florida," she said. "I'm not even clear on that point."

I was clear on only one point—Alderman Bruce Wiggan had suddenly left the city. I was reasonably clear, however,

on another point—who was paying for Wiggan's spur-of-the-moment holiday: John Fowler.

"Mr. Wiggan left without giving me any notice whatever," the long-nosed dame complained. "There are scores of letters that require his signature. There are dozens of appointments with important people. There are a hundred things to do and I haven't the slightest idea where or how to begin."

Next stop, the District Attorney's office.

The D.A., Warren Giles, spotted me as I walked up to the receptionist. He pushed his way through the office gate and stuck out his hand. I took it.

"Didn't expect to see you pop up here," Giles said. "From what Lieutenant Alexander told me, we're on opposite sides of the fence. I may even have to prosecute you."

"Do you really think I killed Nick Flower?" I asked.

Giles smiled.

"That's a leading question, Larry. I'm the District Attorney. If a fellow is charged with murder, it's my job to nail him."

"Even if the guy is innocent?"

"An innocent man," Giles said, diplomatically, "has nothing to worry about."

"Oh, no? How about Lewis Greiffer and George Haas?"

Giles made gruff sounds in his throat. Greiffer and Haas were twin sore points with the New York City judicial system. They had been convicted of murder and had then been proved innocent—but after 20,000 volts had gone through them. However, it wasn't a personal thing with Warren Giles—the Greiffer and Haas cases pre-dated his time with the D.A.'s office.

"There's something puzzling me," Giles said.

"What's that?"

"How'd you manage to get released on bail only a couple of hours after being placed in a cell?"

"That," I said, "should indicate the phoniness of the rap."

"Hmmm . . ." Giles looked thoughtful, then he brightened. "Well Larry, what can we do for you? Don't make it too difficult, now. Remember, technically, we're supposed to be snarling at each other."

I said, "You have a fellow named Frank Archer working for you, right?"

"That's right," Giles said. "In fact, he's one of my brighter young men." He chuckled. "But he's not looking his brightest today. Seems he went to a class reunion or something last night." The suspicious nature inherent to all lawyers now caused Giles to frown. "Why do you ask about Frank Archer?"

"I'd like to see him for a minute," I said.

I followed him through the pool of typists and filing clerks. I saw Frank Archer at his desk through the glass wall of his office. We had met some months before, when he was practising in Long Island previous to his appointment as a junior in the District Attorney's office. Archer saw me just as I saw him. He looked pretty rugged after his orgy at Flower's estate, but now his jaw dropped a few inches and he looked even worse.

Giles rapped on the glass door as a courtesy and Archer told us to enter.

"Just stand by," I said to Giles. Then, to Archer, "Do you remember me?"

"Of course," Archer said, sticking out his hand. "Last April wasn't it? Divorce case in Long Island City. You're Larry Kent, a private investigator."

"We ran into each other since then," I said. "We didn't speak because you were otherwise occupied."

"Oh?" Archer said, looking appropriately puzzled. "When was that?"

"Last night," I said.

"I was out on the town with some old friends last night," Archer said. He grinned sheepishly. "We did a round of the clubs and I guess I had too much to drink, so I can be excused if I ran into you and didn't recognize you."

I turned to Warren Giles and I guess my anger showed in my face. Giles was a good guy, honest and sincere. He knew something was up and he wanted to know all about it.

I said, "Ask your bright young man here. Ask him to produce the 'old friends' he went night-clubbing with last night. While you're at it, try to find out if he's lying because he's afraid of losing his job or if a guy named Flower paid

him to reshuffle his memory. Or maybe he's just plain scared of Flower."

I didn't give the stunned District Attorney time to react. I turned on my heel and exited.

Now Diana Marsh represented my last chance.

For the second time that day, I jabbed at the door buzzer of the apartment shared by Diana and Sandra. The chimes played music, but nothing else happened inside the apartment. However, the witch across the hall opened her door and again she informed me that Diana and Sandra had not entered the building.

Now I had nowhere to go.

I walked down the stairs and I felt as though someone had slipped a pack on my back. For the first time I considered the possibility of John Flower's frame being successful. There were at least ten people who could help me prove, via the time element, that I couldn't have killed Nick Flower. But now there was only Diana. Not Sandra; she could only testify that she had seen me for a few minutes in the apartment. So, it was imperative that I locate Diana.

There was the saloon across the street. I figured I'd sit at the bar and watch the apartment house through the plate glass window, till either Diana or Sandra arrived home.

But I didn't get past the vestibule.

Borell appeared in front of me, a gun in his big paw. There was also a gun jabbing in my back, and the voice of Sam Duff behind me: "We're supposed to deliver you in one piece, Kent, but we didn't have to give Mr. Flower a guarantee . . ."

Borell said, "If for some reason we've got to go home without you, Kent, we'll bring some kind of proof along that we found you . . . like maybe, one of your ears."

4 . . . time to die . . .

We went through the Lincoln Tunnel, and so I knew that Borell and Duff weren't taking me to Flower's Connecticut

place. We drove through the Jersey marshes in the Hackensack River area.

"Lovely spot, ain't it?" Borell said, turning back from the wheel and looking at me with a glint in his eye.

"Pick a nice, quiet spot," Duff said.

"Yeah," Borell said. "We'll do a little work on him before we throw him to the muskrats."

Borell eased his foot on the accelerator, moved the car closer to the side of the road.

"This place looks good," Borell said.

"Fine," Duff agreed.

Borell slowed the car almost to a stop and then he hit the accelerator again.

"What's the matter?" Duff asked.

"Not enough room off the road," Borell said. "A car might come along any minute."

They went through the same routine four times. Each time it happened, I got a queer feeling deep down in the pit of my stomach, even though I told myself that they were only giving me the business. If Flower had given them the order to erase me, they wouldn't be wasting time about it. I was sure that Flower wanted to see me and they were only acting as delivery boys. Why he wanted to see me I didn't know; maybe he wanted to do the job of erasing me himself, to keep faith with the old Sicilian creed of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

Duff broke into my thoughts with: "There's a nice little side road just ahead."

"I see it," Borell said.

Borell turned the car off the highway and we bounced along a rutted dirt road.

"This is more like it," Borell said.

I wet my lips and looked appropriately scared. I could have told them to stop the malarkey, that John Flower's old roadhouse, The Swamp Devil, was at the end of the dirt road, but I kept my lips buttoned. Let them have their fun, I figured. No sense in getting them any sorer at me than they already were. They made a few more cracks about feeding what was left of me to the muskrats and then a towering wooden structure loomed out of the darkness.

Yellow light showed through drawn shades. A chink of light widened at one window and I saw the outline of a man. I hadn't the slightest doubt that it was John Flower.

Borell eased the car to a stop and Duff gave me a few sharp jabs with his gun.

"End of the line," Duff said.

Borell stayed behind the wheel. A few more jabs of the gun was my signal to get moving. I pushed open the door and got out. Duff took his time about leaving the car, using the other door. Borell seemed to be staring through the windshield at nothing at all, but I knew he was watching me through the corner of his eye. Duff remained on the far side of the car.

"I'm not going to try to make a break for it," I said. "If that's what you're waiting for, you can forget it."

Duff cursed and Borell made a lot of noise getting out of the car. The outline of the man was still at the window. Duff came around the car.

"Why didn't you run for it?" Duff asked, sounding disappointed.

"Three reasons," I said. "One, there's nothing but swamp out there. Two, it's what you wanted me to do—John Flower is watching and it would look like I was trying to get away. Three, I don't like the idea of a bullet in the back."

"The leg," Duff said. "You'd have only got a slug in the leg. A little thing like that wouldn't keep you from talking with Mr. Flower."

There was the loud speak of a window opening and then John Flower's voice: "Come on in! What in hell is keeping you out there?"

Borell executed a short left jab to my side. Pain knifed through me. Duff followed with a jab to my back that sent pain in another direction.

"You heard Mr. Flower," Duff said in a loud voice. "Get moving!"

They pushed and jabbed me towards the side entrance of the old roadhouse. Some years back, when the New Jersey police had been amongst the most corrupt in the world, the Swamp Devil had been the most notorious fun house on the East Coast. The sin palaces of Las Vegas were Sunday Schools

compared with what had gone on in the Swamp Devil. Gambling and girls were only a minor entry on the menu. But then an honest administration cleaned out Jersey City, and people elsewhere in the Garden State began insisting that the police do their job. Result: New Jersey was now only as corrupt as most other places in the world and joints like the Swamp Devil were closed down. The big roadhouse was now just a useless piece of real estate in the middle of the Hackensack River swamps.

Borell opened a creaking door and pushed me into darkness. A flashlight beam hit the floor in front of me. Two skinny rats ran through the circle of light. Another creaking door opened and there was an oblong of yellow light with John Flower framed in it. He stepped back as we approached. Duff gave me a final push that sent me staggering into what had once been an office. There was an old desk, a few chairs, a painting hanging crookedly on one wall and another painting that had fallen to the floor. The parquet flooring was covered with dust, rat dung and the other accumulations of the years. Two kerosene lamps sat on the desk.

I said, "I like your Connecticut place a lot better."

"Where'd you find him?" Flower asked Borell.

"We tailed him to an apartment house on East 61st Street," Duff said.

"What were you doing there?" Flower asked me.

He made his voice sound casual, and that sent a danger signal jabbing through me. I had to protect Diana. If it was Flower's intention to tag me with his cousin's murder, then he mightn't hesitate to make something happen to Diana if he learned about her.

I said "There's a guy named Jansen on the third floor. He owes me some money. If you don't decide to support my alibi for the other night, I'm going to need money—plenty of it."

"Why should I support your alibi?" Flower said.

"I guess there's no reason why you should," I said. "No reason that would appeal to you, anyhow. But there's one important fact: I did not kill your cousin, and you know I didn't."

The expression on Flower's face—a half smile—told me that he *did* know I hadn't killed Nick.

"Why was his body found in your apartment?" Flower asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"Out of all the places in New York City, my cousin was killed in *your* apartment. Why *your* apartment? Why not some convenient dark alley, or a backyard?"

"I've been asking myself the same question," I said.

"You must have come up with some answers," Flower said.

"Only one that makes any kind of sense."

"And what's that, Kent? I want to know."

"All right," I said. "Here it is. You invited me to your Connecticut place. That kept me out of the city for quite a few hours. You knew damn well I didn't kill Nick yet you swore to Lieutenant Alexander that you hadn't seen me for months. On top of that, three guys who saw me at your place, they also refuse to provide me with an alibi."

"So?" Flower said.

"So," I said, "it seems possible to me that you wanted Nick dead, and you made *me* the pigeon. You see, your reason for having me drive to Connecticut, your offer of two grand if I agreed to stay out of Nick's way, it just doesn't ring true to me."

"Maybe I had a special reason for wanting to see you, Kent. Maybe my special reason goes back about five years and three months . . ."

"When Nick was on trial for manslaughter?"

"Even before that."

"I don't follow you," I said.

"Those three fellows Nick knocked over with his car," Flower said. "It seemed pretty funny to me that you were right there on the spot."

"I just happened to be there," I said. "I saw him get into his car, gassed to the gills. I saw him make a U turn and deliberately run into the three men."

"At the trial, you said it was murder."

"What else could you call it? His idea was to run them down and he did. If that isn't murder, I don't know what is."

"But maybe you had a real big reason for wanting Nick put away for murder. Maybe you were anxious to get him out of the way."

"I saw something," I said, "and I called it the way I saw it. If you're reading something else into what happened, you're far off the track."

"You saw Nick ram the three guys with the car, then, five years later, Nick was knifed in your apartment. The way I look at it, Kent, that's the long arm of coincidence stretching out twice. And twice is once too much."

I said, "I don't think Nick being murdered in my apartment was a coincidence. Whoever did it knew I'd be up in Connecticut at your place."

"I didn't kill him," Flower said.

"But at the same time you weren't as fond of your cousin as you tried to make me believe you were."

"Maybe I was just trying something on for size when I gave you that line about Nick and me," Flower admitted smilingly. "Maybe I didn't like my dear cousin Nick one little bit."

"What would have happened if I'd accepted your offer of two thousand?" I asked.

"Maybe, if you had, I'd have let you keep the two grand and then I'd have kept a sharp watch on you."

"I'm still not reading you," I said. "You're saying a lot of things, but you're not making much sense."

Flower smiled, but it didn't make his face look pretty—not to me, anyhow.

He said, "Let's get something straight, Kent. You are the fellow who's supposed to say things that make sense. And I want you to start making sense very soon."

"Maybe," Duff piped in, "if Borell and me was to do a little bit of groundwork on him . . ."

"You may have something there," Flower said. Then, to me. "What happens to you tonight, Kent, is entirely up to yourself. I want the answers to some questions and I want you to supply them."

"I hope I can give you the right answers," I said, and I meant it—up to a point.

"The girl," Flower said. "You're going to tell me all there is to know about the girl."

"Girl?" I said, playing dumb. "What girl?"

"The one who was sitting in your car," Borell cut in loudly. "The brunette. The dame who drove away with you from Mr. Flower's place in Connecticut."

"Oh, her," I said. "What happened, did she steal some ash trays?"

"What was she doing at my place?" Flower demanded.

"Well," I said, "she was supposed to be doing what all the other dames were doing, but after she took a good look around, she decided there were better ways to make a hundred bucks."

"Don't stretch my patience," Flower said. "It won't go much further. That dame wasn't invited to my place."

"Wasn't she? That's not the story she gave me."

"We made a complete check after Borell reported on the girl," Flower said. "Every dame invited to my place was present and accounted for."

"Why all the fuss about a woman?" I said. "What difference does it make how she got into my car?"

"I think you should talk," Flower said. So easy and lazy was his voice that I knew he was boiling inside. "I think you should tell me all about this dame, Kent. Don't get yourself into trouble on account of her. I'm ready to be convinced that you're playing only a small part in this business. I'm even willing to forget certain things that you've done against me—but I've got to know about the dame."

I was in a spot and thinking fast, but no answers were coming.

"What is it you want to know about the dame?" I asked.

"Why was she at my place, Kent? What was she doing there?"

I kept right on thinking, but the answers were elusive. Maybe there just weren't any answers.

"I'm not giving you much more time," Flower said.

"Look," I said. "I'll level with you. I saw the dame in your garden. She gave me the very same story I gave you, that she went with a mob of other frills so she could make

a hundred bucks. I said I'd give her a lift back to the city. That's all there was to it."

"What was her name?"

My mind turned over and I *made* some answers come.

"She said her name was Joan Anderson," I told Flower. "She gave me an address and a phone number. I dropped her off at Times Square. Today, I figured I might be able to use her in court if I got charged with Nick's murder, so I dialled the number. It was a phoney. I went to the address. The people there had never heard of her or a dame of her description."

"And that's the truth?" Flower said.

"It is," I said. "Maybe she was up to no good at your place, but all she wanted out of me was a lift to the city."

Flower shook his head.

"It doesn't add up, Kent. She didn't come with the other dames, so how did she get to my place? It had to be by car or taxi. I checked with the two local guys who run taxicabs. They didn't take anybody out to my place."

"Maybe the train . . ."

"No. It's a five-mile walk from the train station and there are no buses. By cab or car is the *only* way out."

"Well, maybe she hitched a ride out."

"First you told me that she hitched a ride with you. Now you're trying to tell me that maybe she hitched a ride with somebody else. Where does the truth begin, Kent?"

"The last story I gave you was the right one," I said. "I met her in the garden after you got that long distance phone call."

"You lied the first time, maybe you're lying this time. I've got no way of knowing. And the dame, Kent, she isn't all of it. The dough is what I'm interested in."

"The dough?"

"The long green, Kent. It was burning hot, but now it's cool enough to peddle around the country."

Flower was looking at me keenly, searchingly. I got the impression that he was trying to find out how much I knew, but I didn't have the vaguest idea of what he was trying to find out.

"Don't you agree," Flower went on, "that enough time has gone by for the money to have cooled off?"

I said, "If you'll just tell me what money it is you're talking about"

He gave me a good long look this time. Finally, he turned away, walked to the far end of the room, turned slowly and came back.

"Maybe you don't know," he said. "Maybe it's a case of the long arm of coincidence."

"It could be something else," I said. "It could be double-talk on your part. It could be that you're doing your damndest to get me to believe that you had nothing to do with Nick Flower's murder."

Flower threw back his head and laughed. When he stopped laughing, there was a nasty twist to his face.

He said, "Why should I worry about what you think?"

I said, "You could have asked me to see you in Connecticut so you could get me away from my apartment. Then you could have had some of your boys meet Nick after he was released from Sing Sing. One of them could have skeleton-keyed his way into my apartment and, under some pretext or other, your boys could have got Nick to go there, where he was knifed."

"Keep talking," Flower said. "You amuse hell out of me."

"You're a smart operator," I said. "It's a well known fact that you always cover your tracks. It could be that you figured I'd be the perfect pigeon for you. I was the guy who gave evidence against Nick during his trial. I went on record as saying that Nick deserved the chair. It could be construed on that evidence that I hated Nick's insides. So, there you are—a perfect frame—right down to the cops arriving at my apartment only a couple of minutes after I did."

"You figure that one of my boys waited till he saw you arrive, eh? Then he got on the phone and told the johns."

"I'm only theorizing," I said.

"You're talking right down a long, rusty pipe," Flower said. "In the first place, I didn't want Nick dead. I had the best of possible reasons for wanting Nick alive and kicking—

money, Kent. A lot of money. The money you might know something about."

I said, "You have me at a disadvantage. You know what you're talking about, I don't."

"That could be," he said. "However, you're a very good liar, Kent. You can dream up the most honest sounding lies I've ever heard. I could talk with you from now till doomsday and I'd never know if you were lying or not. So, conversation is out. But there's another way to get a man to talk."

Borell stepped forward. There was an eagerness in his face that made my solar plexus do a couple of flip-flops.

"My way?" Borell asked. "You ready to try it my way, Mr. Flower?"

Flower looked at me and shrugged, as though things were now completely out of his hands.

"You see how it is, Kent. You may have information that I want badly and then again you may not. I'll never know for certain if I keep on talking to you, so I'll have to try the other method."

I heard a slight movement from Duff, behind me, and suddenly a great, big rock in my throat made me gasp for breath. It's a hell of a lousy feeling when you know you've got a beating coming up and there isn't one damn thing in the world you can do about it.

Flower gave a little nod and it started.

The first punch came from behind. I took it just above the belt—the murderous kidney punch. The force of the shot sent me forward and to the side, right into a wide, roundhouse body punch thrown by Borell. Then there were a succession of body punches and I was rocked back and forth, back and forth. The only consolation was Flower's voice: "Don't kill him, you apes!"

I tried to fall down, but Borell and Duff didn't give me enough room. They kept slamming into me, the ferocity of their blows keeping me on my feet. All I wanted was to lay on the dirty floor and go to sleep, but finally Flower was shouting something and then I was grabbed by the arms and slammed onto a chair. Waves of nausea moved up my throat. I closed my eyes, but they wouldn't even let me be sick.

Slaps across the face fanned away the nausea and the only thing I could feel was pain.

"Open your eyes," Flower commanded.

I didn't.

Another slap across the face.

I opened my eyes.

Flower's face was very close to mine. His bright eyes bored into mine.

"Congratulations," Flower said. "You can take it, Kent. You can really take it."

Saliva, mixed with blood—the last the result of one of Borell's punches that had gone too high—came to my mouth. When I'm hurt and mad, I often do silly things. This time, I broke all records—I spat in Flower's face. Spluttering, Flower stepped back. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped at his face.

"You dirty, stinking . . ." he exploded, but then he just as suddenly calmed. He smiled. "Get him on his feet."

Duff giggled and Borell started breathing hard as each grabbed one of my arms and hauled me erect.

"You're tough," Flower said. "My, but you're tough, Kent. When I meet a tough guy like you, Kent, I get the irresistible urge to make him behave like a scared gutter rat."

Duff giggled anew and Borell's hard, hot foul breath fanned my face.

"Hold him good and tight," Flower said.

Then he kicked. He knew right where to kick, too. Unbelievable pain knifed through me. I wanted to scream, but something kept me from opening up my lungs. Flower kicked again. This time I was able to twist away slightly and his toe glanced off my thigh. Now Flower was doing the screaming. His high, shrill cries of rage were like cold glasses of water tossed into my face. I found strength I didn't know I had. I somehow broke away from Borell and Duff and then I was punching and kicking, too. I caught a glimpse of Flower's white face through a red haze. I was only vaguely conscious of blows to my head and body; all that mattered now was to kick or punch the white target before me. The rage in his face suddenly turned to fear and pain and then there were blobs of red against the white. The room

reverberated with sound. The red curtain deepened and was black. I was falling and then something was holding me up. Meaningless shocks, dull and completely painless, hit my body—it was like the things you feel after a dentist has shot you full of dope and is working on you . . . but even that went away and there was nothing.

5 . . . beaten up . . .

They hadn't killed me. They'd kicked and slugged me into unconsciousness and then maybe they'd given me a few more just for the hell of it. After that they'd carted me into the car and dumped me, far away from the old roadhouse because Flower was smart enough not to want the beating sheeted home to him.

It was a lucky thing—for me—that Flower had changed his ways. In the bad old days, he'd have had me finished off and buried in the swamp, but Flower wasn't a killer any more. He was a b——, but he wasn't a killer. He was friendly with judges and junior D.A. men and aldermen and while he remained a crooked but influential racketeer who stopped short of murder, the judges and junior D.A. men and aldermen and all the others would take his money with clean consciences. But once he killed, they'd get scared and start digging holes for their consciences, and that would be the day Flower would get into real trouble. But I wasn't thinking all this as I lay there in the rain. I was only thinking that I was lucky to be alive . . . until I tried to move, when I started thinking that maybe it'd be better if I wasn't alive.

I don't know how long it took me to get to my feet. I don't even know how I managed to do it, but finally I was erect and walking towards two globes of light. They were very obliging globes of light. They got bigger and bigger—but then, just when I thought I could reach out and touch them, they swerved away. This happened a couple of times, but then two globes of light stopped. I walked right up to them, reached out, felt something hot and solid, and then

my legs gave away and a couple of more things hit me, but by then I was used to getting hit and didn't pay much attention.

Next thing I knew, my throat was burning and I was coughing. Not only was I coughing—I *knew* I was coughing and I had enough sense to try to stop. A gruff voice near my ear said my name and something else which I didn't catch and then my throat was burning again. The voice sounded once more and this time I heard the words: "Take it easy, Kent. You damn near drank the whole pint."

Eventually I discovered that I was in a truck, that the driver and his helper had stopped, picked me up, taken me into the cab and fed me some whisky. They went through my wallet to get my name. They were a couple of obliging sort of guys. They drove me through the Lincoln tunnel and then they went out of their way to take me straight to my door. They even walked me into my apartment and dropped me on the bed. I mumbled something about wanting their names and addresses and they said they'd leave them on a piece of paper or something.

I slept and I slept and I slept. When I awakened, it was three in the afternoon. I didn't know what time I'd gotten in, but I figured I must have slept at least twelve hours.

A mirror told me that I looked terrible. My face was too tender to shave and my body felt like it should be traded in for one that didn't hurt so much. But my brain was working—it was hitting on all cylinders. And my temper was doing fine, too. I'd been booted around from all directions and into all directions and now I wanted to do some more booting back.

I found the addresses of the boys from the truck on my phone table. I copied the information into my little black book, for two reasons: I wanted to show my appreciation monetarily, and I figured they might be useful as witnesses later on.

First move, put the coffee on. Second move, make a phone call to a friend of mine, Dr. David Armitage. The coffee was doing good things inside me when the doctor arrived. He made the expected remarks about my puffy face and bruised body and then he went to work on me.

When he was done, my face looked like the top part of a half-finished mummy. There was so much plaster on my body that walking straight was a necessity. It was a pretty good job. I knew better doctors than David Armitage, but not one who would shoot me full of pain-killer and then give me a couple of needlefuls to keep in reserve. I thanked him verbally and through my wallet and didn't bother to ask for a receipt. Doctors like patients who help them with their income tax troubles.

It was almost five when he left. I finished the rest of the pot of coffee, this time stiffened with some rye. Under ordinary conditions I'm a scotch drinker, but when I'm hurt it's rye—strong rye, burning powerfully on the way down. At twenty-five minutes to six I was feeling no pain, my brain was still clicking away, and my temper was only slightly blunted down.

That was when the door buzzer went. I pointed my spare gun at the door—John Flower and company had my other one —and I asked who it was.

"Sergeant Bogg," came the answer.

I unbolted the door and Bogg barged in, alone. He blinked a little when he saw my bandaged face, but he was a one-track-mind cop and he hadn't come to inquire about the state of my health.

"Lieutenant Alexander wants to see you right away."

Suddenly, I found myself wondering what Alexander had on his mind, or maybe I just told myself I was wondering because I was in no state to wrestle with Bogg.

"All right," I said. "Maybe it's a good idea that I have a nice, long talk with Lieutenant Alexander."

"It's a very good idea," Bogg said with a nasty edge to his voice.

So, Bogg and I descended the stairs together. We got into his car and rode to Central Police Headquarters. It was a five or six minute drive, but Bogg was no conversationalist and so I didn't learn anything about Alexander's reasons for wanting to see me, which meant I had to walk into his office just as cold as I'd been when I'd walk into the Swamp Devil for the session with John Flower.

Lieutenant Xerxes Alexander was doing some surgery

on a big, fat apple when Bogg and I entered his office. Alexander nodded towards a chair, smiled at me, and went right on dissecting the apple. He cut it in half, then in quarters. Delicately, he stabbed the knife into one of the quarters and held the portion of apple towards me.

"Apple, Mr. Kent?"

"No, thanks," I said. "My teeth haven't settled back yet."

"Ah, yes," he said, smiling faintly. "Your face. If I may be permitted to ask, what happened to you?"

I said, "I don't think you'd believe me if I told you."

"I may surprise you," Alexander said, nipping elegantly at the apple quarter.

Near the door, Bogg shuffled his big feet and coughed. I glanced in his direction. If Bogg's eyes could talk, they'd have said: "Don't make things any tougher for yourself than they are, Kent."

"Was it an accident?" Alexander persisted.

I said, "The only accident is that I'm still alive," and then I went on to sketch in briefly what had happened, beginning with the pick-up by Borell and Duff, but still omitting any mention of Diana Marsh.

"Thank you for telling me," Alexander said when I'd finished. "It seems that John Flower really has it in for you, Mr. Kent. First he refused to corroborate your alibi, then he made certain that others would do the same thing."

I must have looked surprised, even through the bandages, because Alexander smiled and said: "I am not stupid, Mr. Kent, nor am I so rigid-minded that I can't see the other fellow's point of view." His face and voice hardened. "That does not mean advantage can be taken of me."

I said. "There's nothing further from my mind."

"The District Attorney came to see me," Alexander went on. "He told me about your visit to his office and your curt talk with his junior, Frank Archer. I already knew that John Flower had lied, but I needed proof, and Frank Archer, after verbal persuasion, admitted that he'd attended a party at John Flower's Connecticut estate and he saw you there. This fact all but mathematically removes you as a murder suspect."

"Then you're dropping the charge against me?"

"Not yet, Mr. Kent. After all, Nicholas Flower's body was in your apartment. You could have been an accomplice."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

Alexander shrugged and had another bite of apple. Between delicate munches, he said: "You've told me about John Flower and his thugs giving you a beating, but you haven't told me why. Now, it can't be that he considers you may have killed his cousin. In the first place, I have certain bits of evidence that indicate they were not getting along too well at the time Nicholas Flower was sent to prison. Nothing precise, mind you, just evidence of the fact that they were having long and rather nasty discussions at about that time . . . not the usual family arguments, either; threats were bandied back and forth—in short, John and Nicholas Flower were at each other's throats—there was no love lost between them. On top of this, some of Nicholas Flower's fellow prisoners at Sing Sing have testified that Nicholas mentioned his cousin's name with obvious hatred, and once or twice he said something about making a fool of his cousin after he was released."

I said, "According to that, John Flower is the best murder suspect you've got."

"I would be inclined to agree with you, Mr. Kent—if it were not for the money."

I was slipping. My emotions were showing. Alexander chuckled.

"I thought so, Mr. Kent. I thought you were taken to see John Flower because of the money."

Bogg came forward.

"I can make him talk," Bogg said. "Give me just a couple of minutes with . . ."

"No," Alexander said sharply. "That is what John Flower tried." His voice lowered, "It is apparent to me that Mr. Kent did not give John Flower the information he desired."

"I didn't have it to give him." I said. "He talked about money. 'Hot' money. He said it had cooled down in five years."

"Five years," Alexander echoed. "What does that suggest to you?"

"It's the length of time Nick Flower spent in gaol."

"And so?"

"So, the 'hot' money is tied in somehow with Nick Flower?"

"Exactly." Alexander put his hands together and his eyes went far away. "A little more than five years ago, Mr. Kent, there was some talk about me being promoted over many senior officers to the position of Police Commissioner of the city."

"I remember," I said.

"Perhaps," Alexander said, "you'll remember what it was that set me back so abruptly but decisively in my career."

"The Brinkhill armoured car robbery," I said.

A cold, bitter smile touched at Alexander's thin lips.

"Yes. The Brinkhill armoured car robbery. Three million dollars in bills of large denominations. The offices of the Brinkhill company were located in my district. I was the local officer-in-charge of investigations. There were five men involved in the robbery. If you'll remember, I made a public statement. I guaranteed to solve the robbery within a week."

"The newspapers made hash meat of you," I said, and now I was beginning to understand a lot of things.

"They crucified me," Alexander intoned. "Perhaps I was a bit too confident. But I had good reason to be confident, Mr. Kent. I knew who one of the five men was. One of the witnesses told me that the mask of one of the robbers had slipped a little, and he saw a scar on the man's neck. The scar was positive identification. The man's name was Brophy. I tracked him down, located his hide-out, and Brophy was unaware of my knowledge. I felt that, sooner or later, Brophy would either lead me to the others or they'd come to him. But then, the one in a million chance, the thing you never expect, it happened. Brophy died of a heart attack."

"That left four men," I said.

Alexander eyed me sharply.

"You know, don't you, Mr. Kent?" he said.

"Well, I've got ideas," I said.

"Let me hear them."

I said, "The three guys who were killed by Nick Flower . . .?"

"Yes, Mr. Kent. Three known criminals. While Nick

Flower was in prison, I checked completely into the backgrounds of the three men who were killed. In each case, there was a link with Brophy. I also delved into Nick Flower's past. It took me until a few months ago to find a link, but it was a definite link—Nick Flower and Brophy had been seen in the company of a mysterious third man—they were discussing something in a saloon booth. This was less than two weeks before the Brinkhill Armoured Car robbery. I haven't been able to get the third man's name, only his description: tall, slim, dark-complexioned with thick black hair, black eyes, sharp-featured handsome face."

"That could be quite a few people," I said.

"Yes," Alexander agreed, "but no one we are familiar with in this case."

"The third man doesn't have to mean anything to the case," I said.

"Quite," Alexander said. "But, on the other hand, the third man could mean *everything* to the case. But let us go back to the Brinkhill robbery. Three million dollars in high denomination bills; also—and this is more important as far as I'm concerned—two employees of the Brinkhill Company were cold-bloodedly shot down by the five thieves. I failed on that assignment, Mr. Kent, but I have not forgotten it. I have been working on it all these years. In the beginning, the robbery caused a world-wide furore. The Brinkhill Company had a list of the serial numbers of the bills. They ran in sequence, and the numbers all began with the letters ABC, a code easy to remember. A huge reward was offered for the apprehension of the gang, and there was also a sizeable reward for the first 'hot' bill turned in to the authorities. Everyone in the country was ABC-conscious and, as the smallest bill was one hundred dollars, it was virtually impossible to unload the money in the usual channels. It had to be hidden away somewhere. My idea, Mr. Kent, is that the money is still hidden away—remember, not one bill has turned up during all these years."

I said. "You figure Nick Flower was killed because of the money, eh?"

"I do," Alexander said. "And, following that line of

reasoning, it can safely be assumed that the mysterious third man was holding the money."

"Then he'd be the one who killed Nick Flower."

"Of course."

"Then all you have to do is find the third—or maybe we should call him 'the sixth'—man."

"I was hoping," Alexander said slowly, biting off each word precisely, "that you might know something of the man."

I said, "I just happen to be a guy who was caught in the middle."

"John Flower thought you knew something."

"John Flower was clutching at straws."

"Perhaps not, Mr. Kent. It was your testimony that sent Nicholas Flower to prison. Then, on the very day of his release from prison, Nicholas Flower was found dead in your apartment. This, you must admit, suggests a very definite link between you and . . ."

"Somebody," I said, "deliberately manufactured that link."

"But why?"

"Maybe to do exactly what has been done, put you and John Flower off the track, make you concentrate on me instead of in another direction."

Alexander nodded, his face thoughtful.

"That makes a good deal of sense, Mr. Kent. However . . ."

"Yeah?" I said as he paused.

"I think you know how much I would like to solve the Brinkhill robbery case after all these years. I would deeply resent anything that interfered with me. I would certainly not look with favour upon any man who . . ."

"I get the point, Lieutenant. Can I go now?"

"There's just one more thing, Mr. Kent. I don't know what your opinion of me is; I have an idea that you do not like me."

"I respect you," I said. "You're a good cop. As far as the personal side goes, I don't think you're the kind of guy who worries too much about what people think of you."

I got up, stuck out my hand. Alexander hesitated, then he shook with me. He had a firm grip.

"I may be getting in touch with you," I said.

"I look forward to hearing from you," Alexander said.

I turned away, started for the door. Bogg was standing in front of the door. He stepped aside at the last moment. There was something in his face that told me nothing had really changed. Which is how it should be. I'd feel disappointed as all hell if cops suddenly became full of brotherly love. My life would no longer be complete.

I wanted to see Diana. I wanted to know why John Flower had been so interested in finding out about her. A cab took me to the brownstone apartment on the East Side. As I paid off the driver, I looked up, saw the hawk-nosed old dame at a window—the old dame who lived across the hall from Diana and Sandra. She saw I'd spotted her and she pushed the window curtains back in place. I smiled. There's—at least one self-appointed morals watchdog in every neighbourhood.

I went up the stairs like a man with glass legs. The pain-killer the doctor had shot into me was starting to wear off a little, but I had a hypo in my pocket and I figured I'd give myself a jab as soon as I found a dark corner.

I pressed the door button of Diana and Sandra's apartment. Chimes sounded their song inside the apartment, but so far it hadn't been *my* song. I pressed again. Still no answer. Then, right on time, the door across the hall opened and I saw the hooked proboscis of Miss Sunshine. She had a chain across the door and there was hardly room enough for her beak to fit through. I went towards her and she withdrew the hook.

"They're not in," she said, and then she shut the door and clicked the lock.

"I'd like to have a little talk with you," I said.

"There is nothing that we have to discuss," she said.

"But I only want to ask some questions about the ladies across the hall."

"Ladies?" She went, "Hmph!"

"When did you last see them?" I asked.

"I must ask you to leave," she said haughtily.

"Look," I said "One or both of them may be in danger."

"It would serve them right!" she retorted. "I have always maintained that a life of sin brings its own reward!"

"Sin? What do you mean by sin?"

"It would be obvious to anyone who saw them," she said. "I mean anyone who lives decently and with proper fear of God. I know what they are—you can see it just by looking at them, the way they paint their faces, the clothes they wear the men they bring to their apartment. You are one of the men."

"I assure you," I said, "that I visited their apartment only to play a few harmless games of gin rummy. Now, if you'll just open your door a little . . ."

"I most certainly will not!"

"But I only want to . . ."

"If you do not leave, I shall telephone the police!"

I took my wallet from my pocket, pulled out a ten spot, got ready to shove it under the door so I could buy a little information, but then I heard the sound of her telephone being dialled and I figured it was time to beat a retreat.

I found an alley at the end of the street and that was where I injected myself with a full grain of pain chaser. I lit a cigarette and waited for a slight giddiness to pass, then I went out and walked along till I was able to flag down a cab. I told the driver to take me to the Kit Karson Klub.

It was still a bit early for the night club crowd when I arrived at the place. There were only a few customers at the bar and a sprinkling of diners at the tables.

The Kit Karson Klub was done up in western style. Wagon wheels along the walls, phoney cobwebs in the ceiling corners, old-fashioned lamps for illumination, honky-tonk piano and the rest of the trappings, right to a sprinkling of sawdust on the floor near the bar. The bartenders and waiters were rigged as gunslingers without hats. The cigarette girls, hat check girls and the other house dames who decorated the place wore very big western hats but little of anything else.

I ordered a double rye at the bar and looked around for Sandra. The females I inspected were very easy on the eyes—but Sandra wasn't one of them. I downed the double rye and signalled for one of the frills. She came over with a smile that was bigger than her costume.

"Cigars?" she said. "Cigarettes?"

I pointed to a pack of Luckies and she gave them to me I put the cigarettes away and held two bills out to her. In my left hand was a one spot and in my right a tenner.

"Which one are you going to take?" I asked.

"Do I get a choice?" she wanted to know

"If you can give me the right answer to just one question."

"I'm not very good at quizzes," she said.

"This is a personality quiz. All you have to do is tell me where I'm sure to find a certain personality."

"I'll have a try at it," she said.

"Fine. Here's the question. Where will I find Sandra Arliss?"

"That's easy," she said, smiling brightly and reaching for the ten.

I let her get her fingers on the ten, but I kept *my* grip on it, too.

"Sandra," she said, "is taking a little time out. She's in the dressing room. Through that curtained alcove at the side. then it's the second door to your left."

"Nicely done," I said, relaxing my grip on the bill.

I winked at her and then I went to the alcove, past the plush curtains and along a narrow hallway. I slapped my knuckles against the second door.

"Hold your horses," Sandra said. "I'll be out there on the floor in a minute."

I opened the door.

"No hurry," I said, closing the door behind me.

She was lying on a low couch, wearing about as much as Cleopatra had worn when she gave Mark Antony the hard word. She rose to a sitting position.

"Hello," she said. "I've been wondering if I'd see you again"

I said "I knew darned well I'd be seeing you again, but I wasn't actually counting on seeing so much of you."

She looked down at herself, then at me.

"Would you please hand me my robe?" she asked.

I looked around, didn't see any robe.

"I must have forgotten to bring it along," she said. "Do you mind?"

I said, "In a way. My blood pressure is going to take a long time to recover."

It was the right thing to say. She moved her shoulders like a snake would move its shoulders if a snake had shoulders, then she eased herself around on the couch so there was room for me. There were three other chairs in the room, but I pretended they were somewhere else. I sat down and she moved herself so that no space on the couch was left unoccupied.

"What happened to your face?" she asked.

"I hit a couple of guys with it," I told her.

"Not fighting over a woman, I hope?"

"It wasn't a fight," I said. "It was a massacre."

She touched my face.

"You're all swollen up," she said, like she was talking to a baby. "What you need is a nice girl to look after you." She pouted. "I'm hurt, you know. After I saw you the other night, I was expecting you to call on me. Instead of that, you and Diana went off."

"Come again?" I said.

"Don't kid to me," she said, still pouting. "Diana hasn't been home for two nights. Her bed hasn't even been slept in. I know I walked in on you two at a very awkward time, though, so if you'll just give me a nice, big kiss I'll forgive you."

She snuggled against me and she purred vocally and physically. I kissed her and discovered that, despite my aches and bruises and the two grains of pain killer in me, I was still partly a rogue male.

"My nice, big, private detective," she murmured.

I pushed her away. "How did you find out I'm a private detective?"

"Diana told me," she said after a slight hesitation. "Why do you look so cross? Aren't I supposed to know that you're a private detective?"

"What made you think I'd gone off with Diana?"

"Well, someone has gone off with her! I haven't seen her since the other day. She hasn't been home, and some of her dresses and other things are gone. I checked at the beauty parlour where she works and they told me she'd

phoned in to say she was sick and wouldn't be in for three or four days."

I got to my feet and she followed suit.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong, Larry?"

I said, "It's just possible that Diana's life may be in danger."

"What? I don't . . ."

"She got mixed up in something without knowing what it was about," I said. "At least, I think that's what may have happened. So, I want you to tell me everything you know about Diana. Everything."

Her eyes were big. She looked scared. She nodded her head up and down.

"Whatever you say, Larry."

She told me all she knew concerning Diana, but it wasn't much. They'd met, a year before, at a party. They decided they could get along together and, as both were apartment hunting at the time, they thought they'd try sharing a place. Sandra's late hours had kept them from going out much together, but they'd remained as friendly as two pretty women can be.

I studied Sandra carefully as she spoke. She wasn't very intelligent and it takes a really intelligent person to be a good liar. She wasn't lying, I was positive of this.

"Was Diana in the habit of staying away for days at a time?" I asked.

"She never did it before," Sandra said. "Of course, she may have done so when I was on a two weeks' vacation once, but she never stayed out—not for one night—to my knowledge. In fact, I never met any men friends of hers till she brought you home two nights ago."

Two nights . . . more like a week, I thought.

"Do you think she's in real bad danger?" Sandra asked.

"I don't know," I said. "It's possible."

She grasped my arm.

"Is there something I can do, Larry?"

"Yeah," I said. "You can give me the key to your apartment. I'll leave it under the mat for you."

"What are you going to do at the apartment?"

"Look around," I said.

"What will you be looking for?"

"I haven't even an idea. I'm stumbling in the dark, grasping for something I can get a grip on."

"You think somebody's got Diana?"

"It's possible. Anything's possible. Now give me that key."

She nodded, went to her purse on the dressing table, took a key from it.

"Leave that purse open," I said.

She looked at me questioningly. I handed her fifty dollars.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"Get yourself a hotel room for the night. Contact me tomorrow. Here's my card, it has my business and home addresses and phone numbers."

I pushed the money and the card into her purse. She shivered.

"You've got me scared," she said.

I put my arms around her and she snuggled in close.

"Instead of going to a hotel," she said, "perhaps I should . . ."

"No, honey. A hotel. We'll play that game of tic-tac-toe some other time."

"I'll be at the Majestic Hotel," she said. "I've stayed there once or twice before and they know me. Don't forget, Larry The Majestic Hotel. It's on 41st and Seventh Avenue."

"I'll remember," I said.

"Don't leave it too long," she said. "You know how interest mounts up when you save and save. You mayn't be able to absorb it."

"I'll spend it like a drunken sailor."

"Not a *drunken* one," she said. "Sober, eh?"

"Cold sober," I promised.

She frowned a little.

"What if you run across Diana and . . . well, what if she wants to continue where you left off the other night?"

I looked her up and down.

"Don't you have any confidence in yourself, Sandra? You just leave that light burning. I don't know when it'll

be—but the time will come when I'll be there to blow out the light."

She smiled and she shivered again, but it wasn't from fear this time.

"I'm holding you to that, Larry. I'm holding you close and tightly to it. Ever so tightly."

She shivered once more and she opened her full, soft mouth and bit her white teeth at the air. My blood corpuscles went into a charge of the light brigade up my back.

I said, "I'd better get the hell out of here before I forget I'm in no condition to take part in gymnastics."

I made a move towards the door and she started to come with me, but I raised my hand in a stop signal. She stopped, but not all of her stopped if you know what I mean, and it was a delightful sight, even to bloodshot and tired eyes like mine. I opened the door and blew her a kiss.

"Just a minute, Larry," she said suddenly..

"Yeah?" I said, half through the door.

"This may be nothing, but I just remembered something about Diana."

"Yeah?"

"Well, a few times when she was out, there were phone calls for her, always from the same place—the Paramount Garage. A man's voice asked for her, but when I said she was out the man just hung up."

"Did she receive any phone calls from the Paramount Garage while you were there in the room with her?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know. You see, whenever we were together in the room, Diana always managed to get to the phone first. Sometimes the calls were for me, but when they were for her she always talked without mentioning the name of the person at the other end. I remember this because, well, let's face it, I'm nosey. I like to know what's going on."

"Maybe it's a lucky thing you are the curious type," I said "Diana never told you who it was at the other end of the phone, eh?"

"No. She was always so darned secretive about her phone calls. I thought at first that she was maybe shy. But then, later on, I started to wonder. You know how it is . . .

there's something you just can't put your finger on. You tell yourself it isn't important, just a personal phone call that she'd rather not discuss with you and that's that, but a funny little doubt comes along and . . ." She smiled. "I'm not making much sense, am I, Larry?"

"I don't know, honey. Sometimes you hear something that makes a lot of sense, but it doesn't register till later on."

"Now you're not making sense," she said.

"Not even to myself," I admitted. "But tell me something. Did you ever try to sneak information from Diana about her phone calls?"

"Naturally. I'm a woman. A woman likes to know what's going on. Of course, I tried to be perfectly tactful at all times. I used psychology—you know, I beat around the bush."

"What was her attitude when you pumped her about the phone calls?"

"Well, she was polite and all that, but she was like a rock."

"Did you ever come right out and ask her if she knew somebody at the Paramount Garage?"

Sandra looked positively horrified.

"But of course not! You never use the direct approach when you're trying to find out about the love life of another girl."

I couldn't think of any further questions. Sandra stood there looking at me. Suddenly she smiled and her face went soft and angelic—but there was a bit of the devil there, too. Our eyes locked. Her eyes lowered and she was looking down at herself. Quickly she looked up and she saw that I'd followed the direction of her own perusal—and she must have also seen the appreciation in my orbs. She placed her hands on her waist, let them slide down slowly, did a swaying little dance. She was a bright, glowing Christmas doll, ready to say "Daddy" at a touch.

"It's a long time," I said.

"A long time till what?"

"Christmas."

"What's that supposed to mean, Larry?"

"It means I've got to go."

"Larry . . ." She pouted. "You don't have to go right, right away soon, do you?"

"Just keep the light burning," I said.

"Bright and hot," she said. "You'll be able to see it from Atlantic City on a foggy night."

"I'll be looking," I said.

"Remember, dear, the Majestic Hotel."

I nodded, closed the door, went along the hallway fast because if she called me back my willpower just wouldn't take another buffeting. I had another drink at the Kit Karson Klub bar, did some thinking about my next move. The only Paramount Garage I knew of was on 3rd Avenue, uptown. I saw the cigarette girl approach, took out a half dollar.

"Catch," I said, flipping the coin.

She caught it deftly.

"Lucky Strikes again?" she asked.

"Nope I just figure you look like Lady Luck. Tell me how it came down, heads or tails."

She looked at the coin.

"Tails."

"That means I go to a girl's apartment. Thanks, honey."

"This half-dollar," she said in a friendly way, "could buy you some good advice if you'll listen."

"I'm always in the market for smart words," I said. "But make it fast, eh?"

"Here it is," she said. "Why don't you settle down and get married—or, if you *are* married, why don't you settle into a nice, comfortable chair with your pipe and slippers?"

I laughed.

"These bandages on my face, honey, did not come from the ire of a furious husband. But thanks for the kind words."

"Any time at all," she said.

New York City, I thought as I left the Kit Karson Klub, is a great place. Everything costs you money except advice. But there's one big thing wrong with free advice—it's always something you'd rather not do.

The Kit Karson Klub doorman whistled me up a cab that took me to the street behind the apartment house in which Diana and Sandra shared a room. A trip down an

alley, a vault over a wooden fence, then a jummy job on a back door and I was in the house without the hook-nosed old watchdog of public morals spotting me.

I climbed the stairs slowly, carefully, and managed to get to the door of the apartment without raising more than a couple of squeaks. I took out Sandra's key, did a quiet job on the lock, let myself in. The room was darker than the inside of a coal miner's pocket. I didn't have a torch on me, and a cigarette lighter is next to useless when you want to make a thorough search, so I fumbled around and flicked on a couple of lamps.

There were two clothes closets. The first one I tried was full. I recognized the dress Sandra had been wearing on the night we'd met, decided this was her closet and the other was Diana's. The second closet was only half loaded. I saw the black dress Diana had worn to John Flower's Connecticut shindig. There were a few boxes and an old suitcase on the shelf. All were empty. I went through the pockets of the coats and things, found nothing but an old dry-cleaner's ticket.

Then I started going through dressing table drawers. I didn't have any idea of what I was looking for. I guess I was just hoping to find something that would spark my mind along a channel that could lead me to Diana. I found only the usual things you'd expect to find in a lady's dressing table till I came across the snakeskin wallet. That wasn't unusual in itself—it was a lady's wallet. But in one of the flaps was a yellowing business card. A card handed out to patrons by the Paramount Garage, on 3rd Avenue just off 87th Street. The card announced: Open 24 Hours per day. All Repairs and Services. Satisfaction Guaranteed.

There was also a phone number. I remembered, of course, that Sandra had answered the phone a couple of times when Diana was out—and the calls had been from the Paramount Garage.

I dialled the Paramount number. The phone at the other end buzzed twice, clicked as it was lifted from the cradle.

"Hello," I said. "Paramount Garage?"

There was a pause, then: "Wrong number," a woman's voice came through, and then the phone clicked.

I hung up, lit a cigarette, sat down, pulled the phone to me. This time I made sure I got my index finger in the right holes as I dialled the Paramount Garage number. There was the small click of the connection and then the phone at the other end started buzzing. It buzzed and buzzed and buzzed before I hit the cradle stop and dialled again. Once more I got the buzz, buzz, buzz and nothing else. The third time proves it, I figured, so I went through the same routine but it was still nobody home.

I finished searching the room, found nothing, doused the lamps and went to the door. I opened the door, stepped into the hallway, started to close the door behind me . . .

It must have been instinct because I wasn't aware of hearing or seeing anything—but I stepped sharply to the side, twisted against the restriction of my taped body and let my knees dip.

I saw a flash of steel and then the fist that held the knife hammered against my head and my knees gave way and I hit the floor on my side. I rolled, figuring the guy would take another stab at me, and as I rolled I hauled my .38 clear of its holster.

But the guy with the knife had decided not to stick around for another attempt at ventilating me. I saw the top of his head as he hurried down the stairs. By the time I got my gun level it was too late to do anything from that position but part his hair. I got up to chase him, but my right leg refused to co-operate with my left and I picked up a few floor splinters with my stomach as I took an unintentional dive.

Doors opened and there were excited, inquiring voices. I looked up, saw hook-nose standing near her door. She screamed and pointed at me.

"Call the police!" she cried. "Call the police!"

A bald-headed guy in shirt sleeves started to come towards me as I got to my feet, but he saw the gun and scurried back to his room, slamming the door. Hook-nose adjourned to the sanctuary of her observation room and I was alone, but I had no doubt that many fingers were turning many telephone dials.

I went down the stairs, using the bannister railing to

keep me erect. By the time I reached the street, all I could see was a car whizzing around the next corner at high speed. A yellow sedan.

People were screaming from windows, so I had to use some alleys and backyards before it was safe to flag down a cab. I told the driver to take me to 3rd Avenue and 87th Street.

6 . . . the naked and the dead . . .

There was a hamburger joint across the street from the Paramount Garage. I went into the cafe and ordered a cup of coffee. A couple of teenage kids with long, dark, dirty hair and tight pants were standing by the juke box, snapping their fingers to the tuneless noise of a way-out band. A tired-looking dame in a raincoat was eating soup at the counter. The guy on duty looked as bored as he could be as he poured my coffee from a big machine.

The Paramount Garage was in darkness. There was a big lot adjoining the garage and I could see dozens of cars.

The counterman put my coffee down in front of me. I pulled a dollar bill from my pocket.

"Nothing else?" he said.

"That'll be all."

He reached for the dollar, but I pulled it back.

"No games, please," the guy said with disgust. "I ain't in no mood for any games."

"I want to know something about the garage across the street," I said.

"Don't know nothing about it," he said.

"You must know something. "It's right across the street from you."

"Okay, buddy," he said, resigned. "What is it you want to know about the Paramount Garage. Like I said, I don't know nothing, but if it'll make you happy, you just ask me questions."

"The place is closed," I said. "Yet they advertise twenty-four service."

The counterman glanced through the plate-glass window.

"It is closed," he said. "That's funny. First time I knew the Paramount to be closed at night since I've been working here, and that's five months."

"What do you know about the people who work there?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed.

"You a cop?"

"Well, yeah."

"Lemme see your badge and credentials if you're a cop," he said.

"I'm a private cop," I said.

He reached out suddenly and pulled the dollar bill from me.

"All you'll get from me, buddy, is ninety cents change from the dollar."

He turned, hit open the cash register, put in the dollar bill and counted out ninety cents.

"Keep it," I said.

But he slammed the coins onto the counter.

"Ninety cents doesn't buy nothing from me, buddy."

"How high do I have to go to get some information?" I asked.

"I don't have any information to give you. All I know is that some of the guys from the Paramount come over here for coffee and hamburgers."

"Tell me about them," I said, "and you earn yourself five I don't want any personal information, just names and descriptions."

"You don't get it from me, buddy. How do I know you're not looking for a guy just so's you can hit him with an order for support or something like that. Maybe you're working for a collection agency. Maybe you're looking for divorce evidence. No, sir. A private detective doesn't learn anything from me. If it hadn't been for a private eye, my ex-wife wouldn't be collecting a dime in alimony. As it is . . ."

He had a mad look in his eye, so I got the hell out of there, leaving the ninety cents on the bar.

I walked down the street fifty yards or so before crossing over. There was a low wooden picket fence that skirted the

side and back of the parking lot. I stepped over the fence. The cars, I saw, had prices white-washed onto the windows; that is, all but one of them. The one unmarked car was a yellow sedan. I felt the hood. Warm.

I eased the .38 out and walked slowly on the cinder surface. Behind any car might be the guy who'd tried to knife me. The smell of danger made me forget about the stiffness of my taped body. I was ready to dive, shoot, jump, swing, kick or stop dead in my tracks.

Finally I was through the used-car lot and standing in front of the garage. There was a huge plate glass front. Light from the street showed me a desk, a few chairs, shelves loaded with cans of oil and spare auto parts. The front door had a burglar-proof lock, so I went around the side of the building, where I found a door. I tried it. Locked. But my skeleton key did a quick job on it. I waited a few minutes. I thought I heard a thumping sound coming from inside the building. I listened harder. No doubt of it. A steady, thumping sound. It could be from some kind of machine that was left running, I thought—an air conditioner or something like that.

I turned the knob by degrees, took a deep breath, pushed the door open and dived for the floor, holding my gun clear of my body so I could start shooting.

But nothing happened. There was the heavy smell of used engine oil; the wood floor was saturated with it. I was in a small room. I could see the outlines of a few boxes, some oil drums. Faint light through a small window showed me another door.

The thumping sounds were now a little louder, and seemed to be coming from beyond the inner door. I got to my feet, but I went around the oil drums to make sure nobody was waiting with a knife—then, sure that nobody could jump me from behind, I went to the door. Standing well to the side, against the wall, I reached out, grasped the door knob, turned it slowly. It went all the way. I pushed hard. The door went inwards, but I remained against the wall. The door went three-quarters of the way, creaking to a stop. I pressed hard against the wall, expecting almost anything.

Nothing happened except that the thumping sounds were now close enough so I could tell they weren't made by a machine. Still I waited. A couple of minutes passed. There was a wooden box nearby. I lifted it with my free hand and tossed it through the open doorway. The box bounced into the room, hit something solid, bounced away and came to a stop.

Still nothing . . . but I stood there and waited. Now, the thumping was very loud and the tempo had increased. I thought I could hear gagging throat sounds, too. I waited a few beats longer and then I jumped into the open doorway, gun ready, finger tight on the trigger, but the only thing to shoot at was the huddled figure of a woman on the floor. The thumping sounds had been her feet hitting against the floorboards.

My eyes were now used to the dim light and I could see that the lady and I were alone in the room. I transferred the gun to my left hand and fumbled along the wall till I found a light switch. I flicked the switch up and the room was flooded with light.

A quick look around. A kitchen table and some chairs, a cupboard, a sink, small gas stove, refrigerator. Then I went to the figure on the floor.

The big, frightened eyes of Diana Marsh looked up at me.

She was tied and gagged. She made noises in her throat and then she started choking. I knelt beside her.

"It's okay," I whispered. "Don't get excited. It's okay. I'm going to untie you. I'll have you loose in no time."

I found a sharp knife in one of the drawers and used it to cut the ropes, then the gag cloth. An oily rag was in her mouth. I pulled it out and she started spluttering and choking.

"Easy does it," I said.

She spluttered a little, then she said, "Larry, Larry, Larry . . ." and she reached out for me.

But I was already on my feet again and listening for another sound, waiting for the hint of movement from the other room.

"It's all right," she said. She spluttered again; added,

"Nothing to worry about, Larry. Oh, I'm so glad you came. I thought it was him coming back."

"Coming back?"

"He went away. He said he wouldn't be coming back, but I was so frightened when I heard sounds a while ago. Frightened but hopeful at the same time. I never dreamed it would be you." She stopped. "Your face, Larry, What happened to . . .?"

"Forget about my face. I want to know more about who did this to you."

"I never saw him before," she said. "He brought me here the other day. He questioned me for hours yesterday, then he tied and gagged me. This morning he questioned me again. He took the gag from my mouth to question me, but he wouldn't untie me."

"What did he want to know?"

"About *you*, Larry. I didn't understand what it was he wanted to know. Something about money. He mentioned John Flower and a Nick Flower. When I said I knew nothing, he wouldn't believe me." Her throat worked. "Larry, I want to be sick."

"Hold yourself together for at least a little while," I said. "This is very important, Diana. There are things I must know."

"All right, Larry. I'll do my best. But can't you take me home? Or to your apartment? Anywhere, just as long as we leave this horrible place."

I said, "This is one place I don't want to leave. You see, I have an idea three million dollars have been salted away in this garage."

"Three million dollars . . . the man who kidnapped me mentioned something about three million dollars, in large bills . . ."

"Go on," I said. "Keep talking."

"That must have been what he carried into his car when he left," she said. "The money. He took some oilskin-covered bundles from that cupboard, then I heard a car driving off."

"When was this?"

"I . . . I'm not sure, Larry. I lost track of time. But it was a long time before you arrived, I'm fairly sure of that."

I said, "He left, but then he came back here. Right?"

"I . . . I don't think so, Larry. I don't think he came back." She shook her head dazedly. "But I'm not sure. After what's happened, I'm not sure of anything."

"You've had a tough time," I said, gently.

"Please take me from here, Larry. We could go to the police and tell them what's happened. It is police business, isn't it? I mean, forgetting about what happened to me . . ."

"It's police business, all right."

"Then . . .?"

"Yeah," I said. "Contacting the cops is a good idea. But let's do it the fast way. We can phone."

"You can't phone from here," she said, looking past me.

I followed the direction of her gaze, to a wall telephone.

"He cut the wire before he left," she said.

The wire leading to the box had been cut. I went to the phone, checked the number on the dial. It was the same number on the Paramount Garage's business card. I examined the phone again. It was definitely not an extension. It was attached directly to the outlet.

"That does it," I said.

She was now on her feet, looking at me through puzzled eyes.

"That wraps it up," I said.

"I don't understand what you mean, Larry."

"You goofed, sweetheart."

"Why . . . why do you say that? Larry, what's wrong?"

I said, "I dialled this number about forty minutes ago. The first time, a dame answered and said I had the wrong number. I tried three more times, but no one answered. Just a steady buzzing."

"I don't see what you're driving at, Larry."

"If the guy cut the wire, then the phone wouldn't have buzzed. You said he left long before I arrived, so he must have cut the wire long before I arrived."

She wet her lips and said nothing.

"You answered the first time the phone rang, didn't you? You heard my voice, panicked, mumbled something about a wrong number and hung up."

"Larry . . ."

I went on, "After you hung up, you did some fast but serious thinking. You got to wondering why I dialled this number, then you realized I might have got the number somehow in your apartment, so you sent your boy friend there to do some checking. He heard me in the apartment, got his knife ready, waited for me near the door. When he missed his chance at me, he came straight back here. I know he came straight here because I saw a yellow sedan go around the corner outside the building on 61st Street. I saw the same yellow sedan in the used car lot."

"There are thousands of yellow sedans," she said.

"The engine was warm," I said.

"All this is so confusing," she said, shaking her head fiercely. "I don't know why you've turned against me like this. Larry"

"I have a confession to make," I said. "It was easy."

"Whatever you're thinking, Larry, it's wrong. Why, I've been held here as a prisoner. I've been tied and gagged for two days."

"Then how come your ankles and wrists don't show the marks of rope chafes?"

She looked at her wrists and her face fell.

"Also," I said, "your lipstick is in very good condition for a dame who's had a gag over her mouth for the past couple of days. As a matter of fact, I'd say that the lipstick you're wearing was applied no more than a couple of hours ago."

She turned away.

"Don't bother to dream up another story," I told her. "I'll only shoot it full of great big holes."

She turned to face me and now she smiled.

"I should have followed my intuition, Larry. My inner voice told me over and over again not to try making you the fall guy."

"Then why'd you do it? Why didn't you pick on some other sucker?"

"Well, you were made to order for us, Larry."

"Us?"

"Carlos and I."

"He's the guy who tried to knife me, eh?"

"Yes."

"And he's the guy who knifed Nick Flower."

"Yes."

"Tell you what I'll do," I said. "I'll describe Carlos for you. He has thick, black hair and black eyes. He has a sharp-featured face, a slim build. For those dames who like the Latin type, he's handsome."

"Very, very good," she said.

"Lieutenant Xerxes Alexander is going to be very happy to get his hands on Carlos," I said. "The lieutenant has been trying to trace Carlos for a long time."

She smiled like she didn't have a worry in the world.

"The lieutenant isn't going to get Carlos. And he won't get the money, either. You see, both are far away from here by now."

"I'm not going for that story," I said.

She laughed.

"Because of the yellow sedan with the warm engine? Carlos realized you may have seen the car, so he switched to another one"

"Leaving you here alone to face the music?"

"Face the music?"

"Otherwise known as holding the bag."

"Oh, you're so wrong, Larry. All you have is your side of the story. By the time the police arrive, I'll have concocted a story that will stand up anywhere. It'll be your word against mine . . . and I'm prettier than you are, Larry."

"Maybe you'll get away with it at that," I said. "I'll worry about that later. Right now I'm still puzzled about a few things. The way we met, for instance."

"It's simple, Larry. I learned about John Flower sending for you."

"How?"

"By taking a leaf from John Flower's book. He has agents and contacts in the police department and in political positions. We—Carlos and I—got to one of Flower's minor bodyguards. It cost us fifty thousand, but it was well worth it. Anyhow, when our man let us know about you going to John Flower's place in Connecticut, Carlos drove me there

in the afternoon. I waited till you arrived. While you argued with the head watchdog, Borell, I sneaked through the gate and into the garden. I could see everything that went on through the french windows. When I saw you approaching the garden after saying a few words to Flower, I went to the pool and did my little act."

"It was a very nice act," I said. "Especially the first part."

"I have a nice figure, don't I?" she said, warmly. "Tell me I have a nice figure, Larry."

Her eyes were bright and glistening and she started to move towards me, hips moving provocatively. She'd torn the neck of her dress to make the tied-and-gagged story look good, the tear was deep, showing her golden skin.

"Not too close," I said, lifting the gun.

She stopped, laughed.

"Surely you wouldn't shoot me, Larry."

"Maybe not, honey. Maybe I'd just let you have the barrel of this gun across the jaw."

She paled a little, then she got back her composure.

"I wonder if you would," she said.

"There's only one way to find out."

"You really liked me," she said. "A woman knows those things. You wanted me . . . just as I wanted you."

"You wanted me only as a pigeon, honey."

"At first, Larry, but then you began to do things to me. I've been thinking of you a lot lately."

"Were you thinking about me when you sent your Carlos after me with his knife?"

"Don't hold that against me, Larry. I was forced into it. What would you have done in my position?"

"That's one thing I'll never know, sweetheart. I don't expect to ever get into your position."

Her hand went to the tear in her dress. She grabbed the material and pulled. There was a tearing sound. She pulled again, knelt, gave one final rip, shrugged her shoulders and the dress fell to her feet as she stood erect.

"Can't we just forget everything for the moment, Larry? It's a strange world out there. A real rat race. But you and I are alone here. Twenty minutes or so from now, or hours,

we can return to the real world. But, for a little while, Larry . . . please, Larry?"

Oh, she was good. She was all woman, but she had the appeal of an innocent little girl. She was a champ, this one. Delilah, Cleopatra, the Borgia girls—they were second-raters.

"Please, Larry . . . please?"

"We'll see," I said. "But first, some more talk, eh?"

"Make it fast talk, Larry?" She took a deep breath that did things to her figure, not to mention my red corpuscles. "Come on, Larry . . . ask me what you want to know. Let's get that part over with." Now her voice was low down and warm. The words came out fast and hot and eager. "I kept thinking of you and me in the apartment, how it was when Sandra walked in . . . I kept trying to go past that moment in my mind . . . Oh, the things it did to me, Larry!"

I said "Going back to our meeting. What would have happened if a long distance call hadn't come through for John Flower and I hadn't gone into the garden to wait?"

"I'd have thought of some other way of getting to you," she said.

I said, "Why didn't you and Carlos leave with the money as soon as you killed Nick Flower?"

"We had to wait," she said. "A ship captain was going to take us to Central America, no questions asked, but he lost his nerve. We discovered that we couldn't get another boat for almost a week . . ."

"So," I said, "you figured you had to kill Nick Flower in such a way that the cops and John Flower would be on a false scent."

"That's right, Larry. You had been instrumental in sending Nick Flower away, so we thought you were ideally suited. Carlos arranged to meet Nick after he was released from Sing Sing. He got him up to your apartment after springing the lock. Nick, of course, had no idea you lived there."

"I moved a couple of times since Nick was sent up," I said.

"And Carlos killed Nick and that was that," she said.

"My job was to keep you out of the way in case it took Carlos longer than we anticipated to get rid of Nick."

"But you messed up with the time element."

She shrugged.

"You said you'd make love to me," she breathed. "You promised. Don't let me down, Larry, darling. Take me, my sweetheart, take me."

She took a left-handed slap across the face. She screamed out with pain and surprise. She bent over, both hands up to her face.

"Carlos and Nick were the last two survivors of the Brinkhill gang. The money was hot, so Carlos had to wait. He met you while he was waiting. John Flower somehow got wind of Nick's part in the Brinkhill robbery, figured that since Nick had killed the other three, the money was Nick's alone. John Flower wanted a slice. Nick told Carlos about it and that was when you made your plans. Carlos had to kill Nick to keep the dough. If he ran off while Nick was in gaol, Nick would have got John Flower and maybe even the cops after Carlos. As it was, Carlos wasn't suspected. He wanted to be sure, but to be sure he'd have to kill Nick."

What I was saying was disjointed and obvious, but I had to keep talking, keep myself at high pitch because the pains were coming back and I was starting to feel a little dizzy.

It was Diana who brought things to a head. She tried to wrest the gun from my hand, so I slapped her again, harder this time.

"Get the louse!" she screamed. "Get him, Carlos, get him!"

I heard a click, turned, saw the cupboard doors begin to open outward. I didn't see anyone, but I wasn't waiting for an introduction. I fired six shots into the cupboard doors. Diana screamed.

"Carlos!" Diana screamed. "Carlos! My darling!"

Carlos may have been handsome once, but a couple of bullets had done ugly things to his face.

Suddenly, Diana became strangely silent.

"No," she said, 'as though it couldn't possibly be true.
"No . . . no . . . no . . ."

"You'd better cry now," I said. "The cops aren't going to let you have the opportunity to wet his grave with your tears."

She turned to me. Her face contorted. Her upper lip curled back and then she was clawing at my face with her nails. I stepped to the side, put my hand against her back and pushed. She went slamming against the cupboard, slid down, right onto Carlos' body. That was when she started crying

* * *

A few hours later, when it was all over but the counting of the Brinkhill robbery money, I stood on the sidewalk outside the Majestic Hotel. I looked up. All the windows were dark except one on the fifth floor, in which a great, big candle was burning brightly. I paid the guy at the hotel desk ten dollars to forget he saw me and then I took an elevator up.

At noon, the candle was still burning, but I didn't have the strength to blow it out.

Nor did Sandra.

THE END

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